

Conundrum

by The Wildcat

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Summary: Two weeks after Black Mesa's destruction, powerful beings converge in the desert. They each must discover their ultimate roles in the disaster still to come. This is an epic or novel fanfic.

Chapter Added: Illuminating Darkness.

## 1. Orderly Conduct

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Prologue - Orderly Conduct<em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>Long shadows stretched down the city streets and up the sides of melancholy buildings. The late afternoon sun hung over the western desert town. The hot, dry wind stilled for the first time in weeks.  
<p>Scarcely a dozen people meandered about on Webber Avenue, and they would soon be inside the nearest structures. The air raid sirens had assured compliance of the denizens, but repeated drills had dulled their reactions.<p>

A police cruiser rolled to a stop in the intersection with West 7th Street. The officers sat quietly for a few minutes and allowed the whipping red and blue lights to signify their authority.

One of the officers finally rasped a question of his partner. "Okay Cap, what is this? Another drill?"

Before Cap could answer, the sounds of rotors shook the air. The marine aircrafts' shadows flashed over the squad car and continued on their eastward flight path.

Cap shot a knowing glance at his partner and then pressed the send button on his radio. "Alright people listen up, this is Captain

Heath. This is NOT a drill. I have been informed that the factory is closed... repeat, the factory IS closed.

"We now report to Agent Oldham and his people. A communications black out is in place for all civilian and low rank personnel. We're way beyond formal police codes and orderly evacuation. No one leaves the city.

"You know the routine frontward and backwards. Always face east, away from the base. Always wear your safety glasses. Keep the streets clear."

With that, the captain and his partner emerged from their vehicle. The men drew their side arms and double-checked the moving parts. By that time, only a fraction of the cities inhabitants remained outside. Clearing the streets would be an easy matter for the local police force.

Three blocks to the south, the doors of a second patrol car opened. To the north, a third duo vacated their cruiser. Soon, the entire city would be surrounded by armed law enforcement.

"Let's do it," the captain muttered.

He then fired a single blast into the asphalt. He knew that the bullet could ricochet, but he followed his orders dutifully. Multiple reports drifted on the air as the process was repeated throughout the city.

Heath raised a bullhorn to his lips and spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a drill. Report to the nearest building and wait for further instructions. Anyone caught on the street can and will be shot." Heath tossed the bullhorn into the car and closed the door.

The captain and his partner began to stroll down the avenue with their handguns at the ready. The remaining pedestrians scattered for the nearest structure. No one actually expected the police to encounter serious resistance, but the officers remained tense for the sheer gravity of the situation.

The few vehicles permitted within the city limits stood abandoned. Each storefront was empty. Every window was faceless.

Captain Heath took note of one peculiar storefront window. Inside sat a row of televisions, each displaying the same announcement. The emergency broadcast instructed all observers to seek shelter.

Heath snickered. Even the bums of the city knew to go into the nearest building when the air raid sounded. It was always the adventurous or a few rebellious teenagers that dared tempt fate during the drills. Or an outsider that stumbled into the city on the wrong day.

The rhythmic thumping of chopper blades drew all attention to the sky. A pair of transports accompanied by their fighter escorts passed above the rooftops. Their easterly course carried them past the city quickly.

No markings. The aircraft were pitch black and plain.

"Rob... those aren't ours." Heath glimpsed his partner's startled face and then spoke into his radio. "Let's hurry this up."

Aside from the local police, the streets had been abandoned. Occasional chatter crackled from the captain's radio.

A group of teens. A bum hidden in a dumpster. They were the typical stragglers during any air raid drill. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"Hey!" Rob barked into an alley. "Put your hands on your head and step into the open!"

Captain Heath rushed to his partner's side. He leveled his glock at the young man that cowered beside the dumpster.

"Okay! I'm coming out," the man cried. "Just... don't shoot."

The man raised his hands and revealed a digital camcorder. Slowly he crept out of the shadows. A look of fear had been plastered on his face.

"What did you think you were doing?" Heath demanded.

"You can't cover it up forever," the man said defiantly. "I know the truth and you have no right."

"What are you? Drunk? Stoned?"

The strange man began to scream wildly. The brightness filled Captain Heath's vision. He closed his eyes and held his protective glasses as though he feared they might fall off.

After a few moments, Heath opened his eyes and stared down at the stranger writhing on the ground with his hands over his eyes.

As Rob leaned down to tend to the shrieking man, the captain turned to face the western sky. Barely visible above the horizon, Captain Heath could see the billowing top of the distinctive mushroom cloud.

A few moments later, the ground began to rumble. The horrific sound of the explosion was muffled only slightly by the distance. The very streetlights and buildings quivered at the sound.

"A-alright, p-p-p-prepare," Rob stammered into his radio, "...let's p-p-p-prepare for r-refugees." The man looked at the enthralled captain. "Cap? T-there w-will be survivors... w-won't there?"

Captain Heath remained silent and awestruck. He had no answers for his comrade. The city was safely out of range of the blast and most of its radiation, but that was the limit to its safety.

The sight before him was indescribable. His own emotions could not be vocalized. It was at that moment that Captain Heath knew his life, his whole world, would never be the same.

\* \* \*

><strong>Credits:<strong>

> This fan-fiction is based largely on Half-Life and Half-Life 2. Both are products of Valve Software. There may also be portions very loosely inspired by the DOOM series, the Quake series, and System Shock 2 (I think). <p>I need to credit Kain, Praetorian, and Darkshadow in addition to myself. They used to be members of the Garg-O-Holics. The first part of thisfan-fiction is based largely on a message board rp-type game we played for a time on that site.<p>

The Wildcat, Commander, ERCU, Doctor Colt, and other such characters are my creations and therefore Copyright The Wildcat. Characters created by Kain, Praetorian, and Darkshadow would belong to the respective creators.

## 2. Suspicion

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 1 - Suspicion<em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>A shimmer of light and nothing more. With a new moon and a light cloud cover to steal the stars, the grey rooftop was bathed in darkness. A weak light above a maintenance hatch merely pretended to offer fresh illumination. <p>The street below, Clifton Boulevard, was dimly lit by street lamps and traffic signals. The nine o'clock curfew had already cleared the streets of life and darkened the neighboring buildings.<p>

Absence of life and light gave the city an abandoned feel. It was a notion that pleased the black suited vigilante.

The silent figure strolled across the roof of a five-story building. Barely a sparkle of glint from his colorless armor gave the silhouette shape. Matching backswept ears crested his helmet. The chrome of his facemask and fingertip claws was barely discernable.

His gate was deliberate. With each step, he concealed the lengthy 36-inch barrel of a rifle in his own infinitesimal outline. He preferred caution and never revealed all of his strengths to would-be combatants.

It was the vigilante's eyes that truly revealed his presence. Backlit night-vision lenses gave him the glowing crimson eyes of a phantom.

He stopped abruptly. He listened intently as his suit amplified the ambiance. The maintenance access began to open lazily. A pittance of light filtered through the opening. Beyond the hatch, a gawky, well-dressed man ducked into view. The new figure crawled through the hatch in an ungainly manner.

Somewhat amused by the sight, the crime fighter lowered his rifle.

With the booming growl of his synthetic voice, he called out to the little man. \_"What are you doing there?"\_

The new man stumbled and turned to face the vigilante. "I had a report of a man on a roof over here. I'm Agent North... Perhaps I should ask YOU what YOU'RE doing here." North leveled a small side arm at the vigilante as to accent his statement. His actions drew a slight snicker.

\_"The Wildcat,"\_ the armored figure said with a nod. \_"I'm on patrol."\_

Agent North pointed to the long rifle and asked, "With that?"

\_"Absolutely, something bad is going on tonight. I can feel it."\_

"I think you need to put down the gun and come with me sir. NOW."

\_"Afraid not agent, I have a job to do."\_

Before the agent could react, Wildcat whirled to face the edge of the building and stepped into space.

Inaudible outside of the stylized helmet, he spoke a command into his microphone. In less than a second, the computer analyzed the command, removed it from its output queue, and executed the instructions. As the ground rushed up to meet him, a burst of super-compressed gas surged from beneath the back panel of Wildcat's armor.

When the dust of the pavement began to stir beneath him, the vigilante barked a second silent order. The hidden micro-thrusters silenced, and he struck the boulevard with minimal force.

After a quick glance at the dumbfounded Agent North, Wildcat continued his patrol. He used a scanner function to monitor the police and military communication channels. Yet, only a single police band was active.

Reports of curfew violations and an occasional bum dominated the transmissions. Wildcat had listened to the same signals every night for the entirety of his two-week stay. It was a remarkably quiet, boring city considering the circumstances.

The crime fighter had been conducting his typical efforts and monitoring his alter ego's investments when the first national newscasts aired. The reporters had indicated that a terrorist effort had been thwarted and that a so-called "dirty bomb" had been safely detonated in the desserts of New Mexico.

Naturally, questions arose surrounding the decision to detonate rather than dismantle the bomb. Later, reports emerged that identified the blast as a surface detonation, a practice that had been prohibited on a governmental and international level for decades.

New rumors arose, but every question seemed to have an answer. Even so, The Wildcat's mind was dissatisfied. The entire matter felt empty. He never could explain his decision to visit the site, but

experience had taught him to trust his instincts.

After a brief aerial search, he had found the blast site among several devastated ruins on the edge of a canyon. Strangely, the canyon did not appear on any of his maps. Wildcat also stumbled across a city nearly 60 miles to the east.

Perhaps the most striking discrepancy was the complete lack of a military presence in the area. Under normal circumstances, an unidentified aircraft such as Wildcat's custom-built Cougar 10 would draw a fighter escort and demands to land. Instead, the vigilante had found only silence.

He had landed outside of the city and walked confidently into town. Two police officers and a man that identified himself as a federal agent awaited Wildcat at the outskirts. Their weapons drawn, the three men welcomed the armored stranger with demands that he surrender. A pair of police choppers had already secured the Cougar 10, and reinforcements were en route.

In the two weeks that followed, the vigilante had eluded the "authorities" and patrolled the city by night. He also selected several sites for possible field bases and observed the populace.

The Wildcat stopped in the middle of the street. One of the police communications caught his attention.

"...suspect is armed with long rifle. Suspect is wearing a... an expensive Halloween costume."

Deep rumbling laughter escaped the black helmet. The vigilante muted the police band and examined his rifle. While he waited, the flickering and dim streetlamps caught his attention. Something was draining the city's main power plant for the third time in one week.

"Hold it freak!"

The Wildcat glanced over his shoulder at the officer. \_"Freak? Oh, that hurts."\_

A second, older officer trained an assault shotgun on the vigilante. "Drop the weapon, put your hands on your head!"

"One way or another, you're not staying on the street tonight," the first officer added.

Wildcat turned to face the officers. \_"What IS with you people?"\_ He then uttered a silenced command.

A simple chime and synthetic female voice conveyed a warning. \_"Stand clear... Stand clear."\_

In a gush of activity, the micro-thrusters engaged and a cloud of dirt and rock encircled the suited figure. He rocketed toward a neighboring building and left a freshly worn pothole in the street.

Once above the edifice, the stream of gas silenced. The vigilante

dropped onto the structure with a hollow thud. For a moment, he peered down at the officers. \_"Well... At least I'm off the street."\_

The Wildcat preferred the rooftops to street travel. Fewer people interfered and he had a better view of the city skyline.

He returned to his original course and resumed his efforts to monitor the police band. Shortly, his thoughts returned to the strange events that originally drew him to New Mexico.

The situation was obviously not a simple matter of political maneuvering or a show of anti-terrorist muscle. The president and his administration suffered politically for allowing a dirty bomb to enter the US. And detonating the device in such a grandstanding manner had served only to outrage activist groups around the globe.

Even the local infrastructure had been adversely affected. The power plant regularly suffered from power drains. Local communications networks had only limited capacity, and no phone or internet connections could be established beyond the city limits.

More disturbing however, was the lack of interest by the locals. In fact, no one even discussed the city's problems or the supposed terrorist effort. Of course, a National Guard unit or some other military force should have been present to help keep the peace, but the streets were patrolled by local law enforcement alone.

Not that crime was a problem. The people were ever obedient and orderly. It was as though the entire city were removed from reality.

The Wildcat hesitated for a moment as a new police report crossed his headset. Apparently, the alarm system at the laboratory complex east of the city had been triggered. Every night the alarms sounded at the Chamberlain Research Institute.

At first, the vigilante had responded to the alarms with fervor. Yet each night he arrived to find a security team reassuring the local police force of a false alarm. After two weeks, the alarms seemed more like the proverbial boy who cried wolf.

Still, the police message left an uneasy sensation in Wildcat's gut. After all, in the children's tale the boy encountered a real wolf but received no aid as his people became too accustomed to the repeated hoax. The crime fighter resolved to investigate after his standard patrol, if for no other reason than his own peace of mind.

Suddenly, the night air was cut by a shriek. The woman's voice was shrill and filled with deathly fear. Her voice echoed among the buildings.

Wildcat charged to the edge of the rooftop and peered down into an alley below. A door in the side of the opposing building stood open. Two grungy middle-aged men slowly pried a struggling woman from the apartment.

The first man menaced the girl with a double-barrel shotgun. Wielding a long knife, the second man restrained the victim. Blood spattered

both men and smeared the girl's long sleep dress.

Tears streamed down the young woman's face. The shotgun carelessly waved to and fro before her. Abruptly, the knife's blade found the straps of her garment. The silky fabric fell away exposing soft skin to gruff, perverted hands.

The Wildcat placed his rifle aside and opened a small holster on his belt. He focused his aim on the thug that caressed the girl with his shotgun.

With a soft buzz, the dart bored into the man's throat. Stunned, he clutched the wound and lowered his weapon. The tranquilizer took affect quickly as the man stumbled about at random.

The second man, startled by his friend's erratic behavior, lowered his guard. His grip on the topless girl loosened. "What? What's wrong?"

At last, the shotgun wielding man succumbed to the chemicals and slumped to the cold alley's pavement. Realizing the opportunity, the girl ran screaming toward the nearest street.

In a single motion, The Wildcat holstered the dart gun, snatched up his rifle, and leapt over the ledge. He activated the micro-thrusters for a split second to slow his six-story fall. The vigilante dropped between the young victim and her attackers.

The remaining thug reacted instinctively and lunged at Wildcat's abdomen. Pain and fear were visible in the criminal's grimace. He stood shocked, astonished to find that his blade had not penetrated the fabric of Wildcat's suit. The man's hand had slipped over the blade and blood began to seep from the fresh cut.

The man dove for his partner's shotgun, rolled, and blasted both barrels into the vigilante at point blank range. Wildcat slammed into the neighboring wall with a thunderous crack. He let his rifle drop to the ground and growled.

The vigilante kicked the shotgun aside and jerked the thug to his feet. The man thumped against a nearby dumpster and turned to face his attacker. With the shotgun in hand, Wildcat whipped the man across the face and watched him collapse into a pool of blood.

\_"You should have surrendered when the knife idea didn't work,"\_ The Wildcat muttered as he retrieved the knife and placed both weapons next to the victim's door. Evidence. \_"And where are those cops when you need them?"\_

### 3. Primal Instinct

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 2 - Primal Instinct<em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

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>Smoke created a black haze in the vacant hallway. The scent of blood was but a ghost in the thick air. Abandoned offices lined the corridor. Emergency lamps cast yellow light into the darkness.<p><p>

At twelve feet in height, the creature could only traverse the tiny human structures in a burdened crouch. His thick chitin exoskeleton scraped the ceiling tiles and exposed the electrical conduits above. He occasionally swatted his broad claws against an office door, more for amusement than any true purpose.

His canine head shifted only slightly with each step. Green twinkles flickered from his pupils as they adjusted for the power-drained darkness. His feral snout whiffed the air in search of new prey.

The remains that lay deeper in the facility were bitter. It was as if decay had soured the meat. But the "scientists" had seemed rotten from the moment of the kill. Perhaps they were some subspecies that possessed particularly sickly, stringy meat.

Then again, the creature may have merely imagined the dislike of the scientist's flesh due to the ease with which he had dispatched them. Even the lowliest prey could offer a challenge when faced with certain death. Yet, these humans had been terribly frail.

It was as though they did not wish to live. Some of them had practically waited for the end. The security teams had been armed with automatic weapons and explosives, but they rarely used them until their death was imminent.

The creature grunted with disgust. He hoped to find suitable prey outside. Nevertheless, the humans had been a pleasure to kill. After all, they had kept the beast in a pin and...

Actually, the creature could not remember what the humans had done to him. He blamed them for pains he could not hope to remember. At the first chance to escape, he had gladly torn his victims to shreds.

He ransacked their laboratories and pillaged anything of interest. It was a minimal restitution for his forgotten torments.

He had taken something called a "cloaking field generator". Somehow, he knew that the device had value, but also needed charging. A second lab had yielded two small green balls. The soft, moist orbs seemed useless. If not for the level of security, he would have shown no interest.

The creature growled with frustration. Each floor was a maze of tunnels, hallways, and monitoring rooms. Of six explosive charges he had taken from a nearly empty weapon locker, he had used five for "short cuts".

A muffled sound caught the creature's ears. He sniffed the smoke and snorted. He had almost missed the bitter human scent amid the smoke. They were close, but not in his corridor.

He hammered an office door and pushed through the frame. After tossing a desk aside, he kicked the opposite wall. The concrete cracked and crumbling pieces trickled to the floor.

Both claws pierced the damaged surface. He pried his claws free and placed a final thunderous kick. The wall fractured, allowing the beast to bash through the new opening.

Minus the scorch marks and battle damage of his rampage, the hall seemed sterile. Florescent lights hummed incessantly. Their sickly white glow covered everything. Everything, that is, except the darkened elevator at the end of the corridor.

As twin metal doors sealed the opening, the creature detected the faint scent of fresh air. Instinctively, he knew that night had fallen.

He lurched down the corridor and covered the distance in a few quick strides. With two sharp jabs, he crumpled the metal doors. Their inner workings groaned and snapped under the pressure.

The creature buried his claws in the weakened seal. Twisted steel tore out of its track. He tossed the crumpled hulk aside and kicked the remaining components into the lightless shaft.

Below, dozens of floor entrances counted the depth of the pit. Above, the elevator car chimed its arrival at the first floor.

After he considered his options, the creature groped his bandoleer for the final explosive charge. The blast ripped the lift apart and fragments cascaded down the shaft. Through the thinning soot and concrete dust, the gapping hole in the first floor wall became visible.

Without hesitation, the creature hurtled himself into the void. His claws snagged the opposite wall. In seconds, he scaled the shaft and hefted himself into the opening.

The first floor was different from the other levels. It stood twice the width of the other hallways. Furniture such as waiting room chairs and coffee tables decorated the corridor. Ornamental wallpaper with matching molding ran the length.

An open lobby lay at the end of the hall. Office entrances were infrequent and randomly spaced. The back of a large reception desk guarded the lobby. Of all the adornment, the windowed wall on the other side of the lobby most interested the creature.

Several stray bullets scratched his boney armor. His prey then quickly fled. Two of the humans sought shelter in an open office. The third sprinted for the lobby. Soured odors filled the creature's nostrils. He would not devour them, but he would enjoy the taste of retribution.

Crunching glass and crumbling acoustic tiles dirtied the floor behind him. Thundering feet crushed the delicate furniture.

The first prey dove over the reception desk only to reappear and fire an assault shotgun. The weapon discharged as it spiraled over the desktop.

Shock and terror passed over the pale man's face as he felt of the spurting stump that had been his shoulder. The claws were a blur. Impact threw the body into the plate glass wall. The creature wiped

his claws on the reception desk with a wince at the soured odor.

Cowering in their office, the two remaining men checked their automatic rifles. One human hid behind an oak desk. The other dared to peer out of the doorframe.

"Okay... he's out," the leader said into a shoulder-mounted radio. "We'll give him some convincing shakes with our grenades and then point him away from CRI."

As soon as the leader was in the hall, the second man stood and readied his weapon. The wall fractured behind him. A smattering of gore erupted beneath the creature's foot. The remains jerked only slightly and then stilled.

"He came back for us!"

The man raced through the lobby and leapt over his other mutilated accomplice. He crossed the courtyard before stealing a glimpse back and lobbing a contact grenade.

Uncertain of the blast's success, the man ran around the nearest building and began to follow a concrete perimeter wall. A jeep pulled into his path and two men exited. A third readied the mounted 50-caliber machine gun.

"Where is he?"

"Headed this way. Grenades ready."

In silence, the small security team waited. Every whistle of the wind warranted scrutiny. Any groan or squeak from the neighboring buildings required cautious observation.

Pained cries fell beneath the crushing blow. The mounted gun fired a single powerful stream before its action shattered over the gnarled body.

A volley of contact grenades struck the vehicle and filled the night sky with fire. Beyond the flames, the creature watched his remaining prey.

Two quick rebounds from the sides of buildings brought him down atop a hapless victim. He pummeled the snapping body into several chunks and then dove away from twin grenade explosions.

The fireball ruptured the perimeter wall. Chunks of concrete mixed with a cloud of sand veiled the predator. Realizing their weakness, the humans escaped in opposite directions.

One of the men ran between buildings and hid behind a storage crate. The creature leapt to the nearest rooftop in a single effortless bound. His eyes appeared to glow green in the miniscule light of the night. His prey had become too easy. He was sickened by their vulnerability.

Angry with his victims and their pitiful actions, the beast hopped down beside the crate and dragged the human out by his leg. The man tried to fire his puny automatic rifle, but the bullets bounced

harmlessly off the heavy exoskeleton.

The creature gripped the man by his chest and crushed his ribcage. He then ripped the corpse in two. With a few strong sniffs, he detected the last prey. It was an easy, though unpleasant scent to follow.

He crawled back to the rooftop and searched for his victim. The grenade struck with a delayed thump. Fire and shrapnel collapsed the ceiling.

The man turned to run only to have the creature pound to the ground in front of him. In a panic, the man fired another grenade. His shot missed wide and obliterated the wall of a darkened warehouse.

The beast's jaws clamped shut on the man's head. A burst of blood and tissue spewed from the dead man as he fell.

Spitting and gagging, the predator groaned with disgust. He stomped on the corpse once for pleasure and then returned to the parameter wall.

In the twinkling light of several small fires, the elongated snout slipped through the opening and sniffed the desert breeze.

"I smell... fresh meat."

The creature darted into the open wilderness. After a few bounding steps, he summoned his great strength and launched into a high arc over the dessert. He sailed above the white sand dunes in silence.

His legs burned as he thumped into the sand. He hesitated long enough to survey the environment. Before him arose a city skyline.

The creature faced the nearest building and leapt into the sky a second time. He thought odd of the city as he approached. It was calm and quiet. Perhaps his prey had conquered the city as he had conquered the laboratories.

Bricks cracked and fell into the street below when the creature slammed onto the side of the building. His weight would have easily carried him through the wall were it not for his own animal prowess.

With a few strong sniffs, he found the scents of many humans. They were pungent, more so than the scientists. But most of the meat smelled fresh, not bitter as his other encounters.

He crawled to the building's rooftop. He moved silently among the buildings. With short jumps, he crossed alleys and streets.

An occasional pause to observe the neighborhood presented only more of the human buildings and their fragile occupants. Had the creature not stalled to double check his own findings, he would have missed the black figure nearly three blocks away.

The silhouette appeared for but a moment above the rooftops before he dropped out of view. He was human, but not a scientist or guard. No flesh was visible. His odor was muted, almost non-existent.

At last, the creature had found his quarry. He dropped into the nearest alley and attempted to scent the man. He followed the dingy pathway with increased stealth.

Near the base of a six-story building, the fading smell mingled with that of a normal human. The creature pulled his weight onto the building's face and scaled the wall with barely a sound.

He stepped onto the rooftop with caution. A human clad in a business suit leaned over the farthest ledge of the roof. The man was watching something down the street. Though he clutched a handgun in his fist, the human seemed unaware of the beast.

"Do not be afraid human. You are too weak to be my prey. But did a human in some sort of body suit pass near here. His scent was obscured, not as rank as yours."

In a panic, the man began to fire wildly at the creature. His bullets harmlessly struck a taller building next-door. Barely two spare shots ricocheted off the creature's chitin.

"That was a mistake."

Into a massive fist, the gun disappeared. An unfired round exploded within the collapsing magazine. The useless chunk of metal cracked to the gravel of the roof.

His fear transparent, the man scurried through an access hatch and slammed the cover. Mildly amused, the creature hurtled across the street in pursuit of his prey.

A strange wind crossed the beast's nostrils. "Something is not right."

It was not his prey. He had sensed something more distant, across the city. The creature dismissed the matter, as he sensed no danger to himself. His prey was close.

High-pitched human screams directed his attention. He sped his pace, careful to retain his stealth.

A double blast broke the night air. He was close. The conflict ahead assured him that his prey was waiting.

#### 4. A Hot Night

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 3 - A Hot Night</em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>The gurgling of magma flow was serene. Steamy gases mixed with soot made the air thick. Crimson as blood, the sky was a void filled with smoke and the occasional disfigured creature. <p>Amidst a rock formation, the imp slept. In such a state of being, its spike covered body appeared gangly and frail. At barely seven feet in height, he

was far from intimidating to his brethren.<p>

He was an assassin. A scavenger. He survived by hiding until opportunities presented themselves.

With a gurgling roar, one such opportunity arose. The imp awoke instantly, his instincts urging him forward. He crawled to the peak of his rocky camp and cast a diligent gaze across a lava sea.

Islands of stone penetrated the boiling surface. It was a wash of molten rock. A shallow island attracted the imp's attention. Two burly horned beasts faced each other with opposing ceremonial displays.

They were of a species named and often taunted for its abnormal coloration during youth. Pinkies. The mocking of their young only served to toughen them and harden their exposition.

The first was younger, a juvenile with its lighter pink skin and smoother features. His opponent was a more mature pinky, a gray colored missugen, with bionic upgrades and battle scars of previous victories. Both were natural predators and powerful threats to the imp. Yet, if one were to fall in battle, he could siphon a generous portion of energy. Therefore, he pressed low and eased toward the shoreline.

The two pinkies charged headlong at each other. When their horns locked, their skulls met with a trembling crack. The ground shook with each crashing blow.

A subtle impact wave swept across the lava as bionic hind legs stomped a younger chest. The imp waited for the wave to pass before hopping to the first rocky island. His progress was slow for fear of a slip. Though his skin could tolerate the churning surf, lava scalding still created much pain.

The concussive force of a leaping head butt on the island vibrated the rocks beneath the imp. He needed to hurry. A victory was immanent. He increased his speed, more visibly leaping from one rock to the next. His loss of stealth was forgivable, for he knew the pinkies were too busy to notice.

As the youth gasped desperately, his opponent reared back and readied its claws for a finishing blow. Its experience fully observable, the victor drew energy from its environment and brought a blazing strike down.

Even as the corpse turned to ash, the young pinky had already started to respawn in his original altar. Perhaps he would be a bit wiser the next time. For the moment though, the mature missugen would claim its victim's lost energy.

It dipped its horned head and held an aggressive stance, low to the ground. It began to grunt in a rhythmic pattern similar to a chant. Cracks formed beneath its feet. Flames and fountains of lava danced around the tiny island.

It was a narrow window of opportunity. The imp scrambled over smaller rocks and dove into the ring of free and flaring energy. Huddled

beneath metallic hind legs, the imp went unnoticed until the fires subsided.

Angered growls ruptured from the pinky. The first pulverizing stomp fell mere inches to the left of the imp's head. He had only seconds to flee. Fortunately, he was a natural escapist.

Bounding from rock to rock, the imp hurtled ashore. He made no hesitation to check for pursuit. Instead, he scrambled into a clump of rocks. With a small dose of his ill-gotten charge, he used the surrounding shadows to disappear.

In the brief moments that followed, the world was again silent. The messugen had not seen fit to give chase.

A bolder shattered. Startled, the imp searched his surroundings. A crack beneath him pulled his vision down. A pentagram formed as a glowing radiance under his feet. The shape and accompanying glyphs scorched the rock.

White-hot energy erupted from the shape and engulfed the imp. It was blinding and blistering. But he was calm for he had experienced a summoning portal before.

His vision returned slowly. A tower of flames was the gateway out of his native border world. In a slight daze, the imp stepped into an open field.

Mounds of debris and rubbish consumed the landscape. The odors of rot, decay, and sulfur were a rancid potpourri. The night sky twinkled with the tiniest of stars.

Fear. Weakness. The imp focused on the welcome sensations. Before him lay a cowering animal. A human.

The trembling man wore a scorched uniform and clutched a small handgun. His face and hands revealed burns. He was a pitiful specimen, even for a human.

The imp had visited the human world before. It was a welcome diversion. A chance to hunt. But portals to the human world were rare. Even the more powerful brethren had to join their energies to open a single portal. Only if the gates were reopened would the full powers of the brethren be made known.

Most of the portals were generated in the destination world as a summons. And humans were too weak and primitive to open a portal by their own devices. No, the man, a security guard by his appearances, must have been an innocent bystander. Or, better yet... a sacrifice.

The imp grinned and stepped forward.

"N-n-no," the man stammered, "s-stay back!" As if to punctuate his plea, the man fired a single 9mm round.

Stunned, the imp clutched his wound and staggered.

"Not so tough now, are ya? Freak of nature. This is my junkyard. Beat it or I'll give ya another."

The pain had already started to subside. A crooked grin snaked across the imp's face. The little man was pathetic and foolish, a pleasing combination. In a scratchy and cracking voice, the imp spoke. "Shra nishvu rhagh, shriija serverus narato sei gharak skahorna grehsjii."

The guard's confidence visibly faded. "Uh... did you... what?"

The imp started to smile with a crooked, carnivorous grin. "I am Sshkavi 'shra. I said that I am newly spawned from hell and not yet adapted to your atmosphere... and that you just made the mistake of your life."

In panic the man began to fire hastily. Bullets tore through the night air and found nothing. Shk'Rha had easily dropped to the ground and scuttled into the shadows of a trash heap. With only a little focus, his shadowmeld rendered him invisible. At the final click of dry-fire, he silently reemerged behind his prey.

"What the hell?" the man muttered as he searched for the escaped imp.

"That's right friend," Shk'Rha whispered. "Hell. Where you'll be going right... now."

Realizing his mistake, the man tried to turn and face the voice. Shk'Rah pressed the claws of his fingertips into the man's back with ease. The man was soft.

A few muffled cracks and the imp could feel the cool breeze cross his fingertips once again. He slung the corpse aside and shook a few remnants from his gnarled hand. "Excuse me sir," he chuckled at the body, "but is this yours."

The smoldering remains of Shk'Rah's portal provided enough light to check his wound. Although pain was absent, the bullet had done significant damage.

No matter. The imp crossed his arms and began to chant an ancient curse. The garbage seemed to quake with each word. Cracks split the gravel road on which the imp stood. Geysers erupted from the surrounding soil.

As the earth fell away beneath the guard's body, a river of lava filled the gap. A wall of flames quickly engulfed Shk'Rah and his prize. The blast wave swept across the rubbish heaps. A cloud of ash veiled the night sky.

The imp strolled down the gravel road, pleased with his regeneration and hungry for fresh energy. Over the smells of garbage and soot, Shk'Rah noticed a different odor.

Smoke. Narcotic smoke. A pleasing aroma. It was the stink of easy prey.

Shk'Rha leapt to the top of an unsteady rubbish heap and studied the drifting trail of fragrance. His gaze fell on the nearest buildings. An alley, dark and barren, formed between neatly kept office and apartment buildings.



The presence of such structures neighboring the city dump momentarily distracted the imp. They were too nice. Out of place. Had the human world changed so vastly since his last visit, that the humans no longer held some of their peculiar arrogances?

His curiosity faded with a subtle muscle cramp, a reminder of his freshly healed injury. He sprinted across the open landfill and hurtled the perimeter fence with ease. As he entered the alley, he dropped to a low crouch. His shadowmeld guarded his progress into the open passage.

The musty odor grew in intensity with each step. Its origin lay beside an overfilled trash dumpster. A pair of humans, bums by their filthy garb and pungent scents, rested at the base of the dumpster. They each took turns smoking and speaking.

Shk'Rha began his approach quietly but could not resist the urge to frighten. It was a matter of pride that he be a source of fear for his victims. A simple tap of a clawed toe on the hard concrete provided the desired effect.

"What was that?" one bum grunted.

His companion coughed and grunted his negative response.

"Serious man. I heard somethun."

"Ugh... What are you gettin on about?"

"I'm tellin ya John. I heard somethun."

The imp could not help but grin and tap the ground a second time. The first bum snorted and began glancing around wildly.

His friend was less enthusiastic. He stood and stretched himself. A spastic fit of coughing was followed with spit that landed before Shk'Rah's feet. "You're just gettin paranoid. It's just a cat or rat or somthin."

"Bull! I know what I heard. Move your fat lazy..."

"Hey! You watch yourself Mike. Don't forget who you're talkin too. I'm tellin ya, you better quit playin with all that cult crap. It's makin ya..."

"I'LL BELIEVE WAHT I WANT! And you better watch out John, or they'll come for you."

John was silent. His stare was visibly passed his friend. Shk'Rha tried to flex his muscles as he let his shadowmeld fade. He wanted this John to feel every quivering pinch of terror.

"Uh... John? What's up man? Somethin I said?" Mike started to glance over his shoulder, but froze with sudden awareness.

Shk'Rha could not resist. "Your practices saved you today boy... at least for now," he growled. He then glared at John. It was as he suspected. Easy Prey.

John whirled and sprinted down the alley. It was a pathetic display from a slow, wheezing human. Shk'Rha leapt and clutched the side of a building. A few quick strides carried him to the rooftop. From that vantage, the entire alley was visible. John was running toward an empty gravel parking lot.

The chase was simple at the rooftop level. Shk'Rha found his path unobstructed and his movement unencumbered in the human world's lighter atmosphere.

This John was a less than ideal specimen. Slightly overweight and unkempt, the human was winded. He hesitated and dared tempt a glance over his shoulder. Naturally, he found only a wet Mike cowering behind the dumpster. With that false assurance, John doubled over and choked for air.

Stealth seemed a waste on this human. Shk'Rha crawled down the wall and approached John smoothly. When the human finally dared look up, the imp pounced.

John's skull produced a wet crack as he slammed into the ground. Shk'Rha crouched over his victim and clasped either side of the head. "Good bye. Enjoy your stay... in hell."

With a swift twist and pressure applied to the throat, John's head tore free.

The screams of police sirens entered the abandoned landfill a few blocks away. The imp was amused by the slow reaction of the local "authorities". Even so, he would need a stronghold for protection against the humans, a place to relax. Humans were weak, but a large enough mob with weapons could be dangerous.

First, however, Shk'Rha needed to feed. Also, his soulheal would act as an excellent distraction for the blithering human police.

He crossed his arms and spoke. Windows in the neighboring buildings cracked. Smoke and steam billowed into the air. The ground beneath the imp erupted into a towering fount of flames. Within the inferno, the imp fed on scorched flesh and absorbed ambient energy.

The blast wave shattered the nearest windows and triggered a weak car alarm nearby. Observers gathered in the surrounding buildings and the police siren approached. Yet, none of the onlookers would see Shk'Rha.

He had already started slinking from shadow to shadow on his journey back to the city dump. He even watched the lone police cruiser pass before he leapt the perimeter fence.

He scoured the landfill with a single vacant gaze. Among the heaps of refuse lay small storage sheds. And among the sheds, only one stood out as a point of light. The imp made haste to visit the security guard's tiny shack.

Inside were an active television and dim lamp. A few candy wrappers littered the floor.

"My altar," Shk'Rha hissed.

He thrust his hands into the sky and began to chant. His focus guided, the imp was unwavering. Tremors passed through the soil. The ground broke. A blaze of lava enveloped the shack. With an explosive discharge of energy, a volcanic cave formed from tentacles of magma and flame.

Twin beasts tore through the ground and settled beside the smoldering structure. With scorching eyes and translucent film over an apparent magma body, the monsters were formidable.

"My hydras," Shk'Rha said, "guard this place with your lives my friends."

As ash and soot rained down on the newly formed rock structure, the imp prepared to retire for much needed rest and meditation. Then he felt it. Fear. Dread. Vulnerability. And pain. A distant bellow beckoned him explore the city.

The buildings fell dark. Streetlights vanished into the night. A black out. It was an ideal opportunity.

Shk'Rha raced across the landfill with abandon. In the darkness that had swallowed the city, he no longer needed fear prying eyes. His appearance was that of a stray dog or such useless animal. No one would pay him mind.

The police siren again entered the dump as the imp bounded over the perimeter fence. He paused for a brief moment of insidious pleasure. Gunfire and the high-pitched screams of death. He knew his hydras would enjoy their snack. With a guttural laugh, Shk'Rha turned to the open streets. He knew opportunities would abound that night.

## 5. The Night Shift

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 4 - The Night Shift<em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>The light was blinding. For the first time in weeks, the long concrete hallway was bathed in florescent illumination. Sporadic chips and cracks in the walls spoke of hardship. An occasional flickering light fixture added to an already eerie  
ambiance.<p><p>

Mold accented the stench of the stale air. Aside from a few crickets and an occasional creek or pop, the corridor was soundless. A dozen steel blast doors sealed the hall from the nearest surface access.

The only open doorway was that of a humble computer laboratory. A lone scientist abandoned his power substation and approached the lab entrance. The room itself was a rectangular concrete chamber. Older computer equipment lined the walls. A set of newer consol panels crossed the center of the room.

A stretch of concrete passage exited the laboratory opposite its entrance. Three scientists awaited their colleague quietly. He was greeted with pleased grins and congratulations.

"That's that," the returning scientist declared. "This quadrant of sector F has power again."

"Excellent," another responded. "The Lambda search team can try to reach the surface if they want. Personally, I'd rather stay down here. I think we all know what's waiting up there."

The other scientists gestured with nods of affirmation. It was in that moment of solemn quiet that the disturbance attracted their attention. A rumble coursed down the outer corridor. Energy discharge pulsed through the walls. Distinctive crackling identified the particle buildup.

The scientists ducked behind the machinery and claimed the individual weapons they had scavenged. A brilliant flash in the corridor heralded silence.

A soot black figure stood beside the power substation. Featureless, his face scanned the environment, his hot red eyes glaring.

His blue security team uniform was freshly pressed, as he believed it should be. Grey and black body armor, a stolen prototype, protected his torso. A gleaming chrome helmet sat atop his head.

The guard stood perfectly still until he had completely examined his surroundings. Then he took a few slow steps and clinched his fists.

"This isn't the one I wanted," the figure grunted with a hint of anger. But his temper cooled. "No matter. I can still have some fun here and try again later."

His sidearm in hand, the guard approached the laboratory entrance. He could sense the scientists, despite their efforts to hide. He could smell death and fear all around.

It was a younger scientist that dared to peer from behind an ancient computer. Slowly, the scientist eased into the open having recognized a security team uniform. His colleagues followed suit.

Puzzled, one of the men asked, "A security guard?"

"No," another declared with fright, "something else!"

The guard suddenly felt very amused. He thrust his free hand into the air and exclaimed, "Yes! That's right scientists! Your life will be a pain from now on!"

Sparks erupted from the surrounding computers. Dark energy crawled up the walls. The room began to tremble fiercely. A swirling black mass formed in the ceiling.

In panic, the scientists dropped their weapons and attempted to flee. The first victim was older. His reaction was too slow. A moment before he could latch onto a consol, the gravitational pull yanked him into the dark portal.

With a shriek, the second scientist clutched a crumbling piece of equipment. Moments later, the metal casing buckled and ripped free. The man flailed wildly to no avail.

A third scientist scrambled beneath the central consol and strained to hold on. His only remaining comrade thrust a desperate hand in a plea for help but quickly spiraled into the void.

His energy ebbing, the guard released his portal. Given a few minutes, he would be fully able to continue the encounter, but he wished for more.

The sole remaining scientist dropped to the floor with a rough thump. He staggered to his feet and sprinted, screaming with each step, into the open passage.

"Yes! Run... tell the others! You will die shortly and so will your friends."

The guard strolled into the main corridor. A human world had always seemed a strange place compared to his border world.

His first encounter with scientists had been boring. They opened a portal and started pilfering his lands. When they finally stumbled into his stronghold, they actually tried to apologize.

An amusing thought brought a soft chuckle from the guard. He had defeated the scientists with a heavy hand and entered their world. He had enjoyed the destruction of their base.

Even so, a contingent of soldiers and guards had challenged him. They made him expend his energy and then forced him to retreat. He stole weapons and armor from the best of the human's laboratories, but he failed to use his acquisitions properly. Ultimately, he was forced to return to his world.

That was the human's biggest mistake. He took several prisoners in the process. Though the scientists managed to seal the gateway to their world, the guard was confident. He took information from his victims. He tortured them for training and tutoring.

The guard had bettered himself in the years that followed. As his victims died under his tyrannical grip, he mastered fighting techniques. His power grew, as did his knowledge of physics and scientific theory.

Having extinguished his supply of prisoners, the guard began efforts to reopen the connection between the human world and his border world. However, his efforts had obviously proven unsuccessful. He knew instantly that the base in which he had arrived was not his intended target.

The guard grunted with frustration. He wanted to devastate the scientists. Yet, he found himself in a base that already bore the marks of conquest.

He grew impatient. He wanted to hurt somebody. With a swift step, the guard entered the shadows behind a large crate and exited in a laboratory.

The lab was much darker then the corridor he had abandoned. A single marine slept quietly beside a sealed blast door. No doubt, the door had cut him off from a larger unit. Or perhaps he was a guardian that had drifted off during his watch.

Irritated, the guard kicked the slumbering man's boot.

"Wake up! Go for your gun."

Instinctively, the startled soldier drew his automatic rifle into firing position. He then dropped his weapon beneath a thunderous report. The marine slumped down and toppled out of his seat. His blood slowly streamed down the wall.

The guard passed into a dark corner and emerged in a seemingly empty corridor. Only emergency lights cast muted radiance into the concrete hall. Crates were littered about, military supplies that had yet to be unpacked. A pair of elevator doors was inset in one wall. Steel blast doors enclosed the rectangular passage.

Marines were hidden among the crates. The guard could feel them. He could sense their fear. The first soldier fired a stream of jacketed slugs. Harmlessly, the bullets struck the walls and crates. Only two found their marks but they were stopped by the guard's advanced body armor.

His counter attack was simple and direct. The guard thrust a fist into one of the crates and felt around. Satisfied with his findings, he primed the grenade and hurled it into the midst of his opponents.

"Grenade!"

Two of the marines found safety. Their companions, however, were less fortunate. The blast shattered neighboring crates and filled the hall with flame. Shrapnel danced off the ceiling. One of the emergency lights failed with a burst of glass and sparks.

In the smoke and haze, the surviving soldiers faced the blazing red eyes. One marine's helmet toppled from his head. His body struck the floor as quickly, the bullet hole bored through his temple.

The second marine fired wildly into the darkness. His hopes of lucky success faded with the click of dry-fire. The guard placed a single square kick into the soldier's body armor. A metallic crack resounded as the marine's corpse bounced off steel. A slight dent remained in the blast door above the fallen soldier.

Disappointed, the guard holstered his glock as quickly as he had first drawn it. He was bored with the weaklings he had already dispatched. At least the humans from his original encounter had been fighters. They were more fun to torment and destroy.

Perhaps he could find something more fun outside of the human base. The guard backed into a darkened corner and stepped through the shadow of a rock formation.

The outside world was open and vacant. A white desert covered everything.

The guard would have been angry at the lack, would have returned to his own world, had he not sensed the life. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of people concentrated in a single location.

They were too distant to identify individually. He could only sense the condensed mass of many at that range. Rejuvenated, the guard passed behind the rock formation and emerged in an open alley.

He gazed at the surrounding buildings with pleasure. Such sturdy structures. So many victims.

"This should be fun."

He had taken not but two steps when the ground shook. Excitedly, he felt the air. He reached out with his senses and felt the evil passing through the wind. He felt the concentration of great powers in the city.

The city was ripe. Destruction and chaos were in his grasp. With a satisfied sigh, the guard began a brisk walk toward the first of the great powers he had sensed.

## 6. Stranger Things Have Happened

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter5 -Stranger Things Have Happened<em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>Scant light filtered into the alley. It was a flickering, dim haze from the streetlights of the intersection. Heaps of rubbish bags lay piled beside overfilled dumpsters. <p>The alley was otherwise empty to an untrained eye. Even with the ruckus of a half-naked woman screaming and the ensuing gunfire mere blocks away, none of the locals seemed to notice.<p>

The CRI security team was a well-armed clump of shadows. Equipped with the finest weapons and technology available, four guards made slow progress toward the corner of a concrete parking garage. At point, the first guard produced a tracking monitor from her form-fitting armored suit. The dull green indicator provided direction and distance information on demand.

A tall, broad shouldered guard stepped forward and adjusted his collar. "Observation," his synthetic radio voice ordered. "Combat ONLY if necessary. DB, top level. Watch for nosies and blue birds, but eye on the targets. DC, six o'clock. Watch for suits and blues. DD, I'm point. Tracker and SkyLight for local traffic."

With the smooth effort of a finely trained military task force, the team dispersed. Two of the guards slipped deeper into the alley. The third disappeared behind the nearest dumpster.

The leader, designated DA, approached the street. He donned an advanced night-vision headset and tapped a switch on the back. His

vision slowly brightened with a phosphorescent hue. He fingered a dial between the lenses for focus control.

A port near the base of his headset readily accepted the connection of his radio transmitter. A click in his right ear announced positive contact.

"DT-One to One."

DA received a grainy response. "One, go ahead."

"DT-One on mark."

"Ten-Four. DT-One hold for tie-in."

Hold? Had the van been delayed?

A short crackle broke the silence. Then a new, more mature voice crossed the signal. "Two-oh-five to One."

"One, go ahead."

"Tie-in active. We'll take it from here."

"Ten-Four. DT-One proceed."

With a quick glance into the alley, DA pressed against a concrete wall and sank to a half-squat.

"DA, DD. SkyLight confirms targets Alpha and Beta. Three blocks north."

"DA, DB. Visual. Confirm target Alpha. Negative target Beta. He's in the alley."

DA retrieved a small black box from his suit and removed an adhesive strip from its base. He mashed the device against the wall, its lenses aimed toward the northern intersection DD had indicated.

He then produced a thin attachment cord. The instant he connected the camera to his headset, the vision in his right eye vanished. Seconds passed, but the camera's feed did eventually appear.

"DB, DA. Candid Camera's on. Turn up the volume."

DA waited patiently for his subordinate to assemble and activate a ranged microphone. The images before his right eye were straight-forward. Target Alpha, a merc or vigilante of some kind.

He was regarded highly during the mission briefing. His gadgetry and creativity drew subdued accolades. Most interesting, of course, were reports that he had withstood armor-piercing bullets and small explosives during some of his endeavors.

Still for such a remarkable character, he seemed rather simple. DA was watching the supposed mighty-man inspect a parked pickup truck. According to SkyLight, a twelve foot beast was less than six meters away. Yet, the merc was checking license plates.

The Wildcat, as he called himself, casually stepped back. He gave the



vehicle's bumper a soft kick and proceeded into the street. Unbelievably, he was about to examine the truck's inspection and registration stickers. DA had started to frown at the disappointment before he finally caught on. The merc was sneaking a glimpse at his stalker.

"DA, DB. Audio good to go. Wait one... Target Beta confirmed. He's in the open."

The bulky shape slouched into view. His chitin exoskeleton gave the creature the appearance of a living tank. By all indications, the battle would be short.

"Two-oh-five to DT-One. AV feed is prime. En route. ETA ten minutes."

"Ten-Four," DA replied.

"Well, aren't you a smart one." The unexpected, belching grunts temporarily confused DA.

He regained his composure as his camera feed tracked the beast. The lumbering form approached the merc, who had backed into the street. The Wildcat's focus was clearly set on his adversary.

"What? Were you expecting something short?" the creature growled. As if in exhibition, he clasped his paws and stood ridged as to concentrate.

When the merc stepped under a street-light opposite the beast, the parked truck heaved and leapt into the air. Crashing end-over-end the vehicle crushed a car. DA was certain that the creature never moved.

"I'm waiting. It's your move," the beast snarled, "Or are you afraid?"

To DA's surprise, the merc responded in a menacing rumble of his own. "Very well."

His speed was jarring. A single sweeping motion brought the sniper's rifle to bare. It was a startling flash with pin-point accurate aim.

Yet, the creature stood unfazed. Its massive paw had risen to protect its face as quickly. The bullet barely scratched the chitin armor.

"Not bad," the beast grunted. The entire hulking form lunged forward. It covered the distance with ease, claws outstretched.

But the merc stood his ground. Stoic. Unmoving. Waiting.

At the last possible moment, he fell away and rolled to safety. The beast hammered the suddenly exposed light post head first. Sparks exploded as the bulb struck the nearest building. Stunned, the creature staggered away from the crumpled fixture cursing his human opponent.

In his daze, the creature stepped on the sniper rifle, apparently

abandoned as useless. The burst of a cartridge in the magazine was audible without amplification. DA was surprised to see Wildcat abandon his weapon so easily. It was an unprofessional act.

Strangely, the merc appeared to be inspecting the damaged streetlight. He grabbed the base of the lamppost and strained to shift it further. A crashing blow from the creature's claws battered the merc onto his side.

"DA, DD. Blues en route. ETA four minutes. Two cars."

At last, the locals had started to take concerned notice of the strange goings-on. With explosions near the city landfill and the typical curfew patrols, the local "police force" seemed abnormally careless and undermanned. One squad car had been following The Wildcat earlier, but even then they had given up rather easily.

"I think I've found your weakness," the beast growled. "Don't think I can't see your plan."

The merc was cowering behind the crumpled streetlight. Naturally, the creature would not duplicate its headlong mistake. It stepped around the buckled light and raised its claws for another pounding blow. The fight was all but over.

"I don't need you to be blind to my plans," Wildcat growled. "I just need you to be close enough."

The merc wrapped his left arm around the beast's leg. He thrust his free fist into the base of the lamppost. A flurry of sparks erupted from the impact as he ripped the power cable free and mashed the exposed wires.

Arcs of white-hot energy coursed over his suit and into the creature's chitin. The beast bellowed with agony as its exoskeleton became heated by the voltage. The cry shattered nearby windows and triggered car alarms.

Soon, other streetlights began to fail. The entire neighborhood was bathed in darkness. Current ceased to flow from the cable and the creature collapsed.

For a moment, DA sat on his heels in silent awe. It was impossibility.

The Wildcat arose and deftly collected the barrel and damaged clip from his rifle. However, he seemed on edge and clumsy as his step became a stagger. He must have been injured more seriously than he wished observers to witness.

"DA, DD. Blue cars. Four blocks north."

"DA, DB. Confirmed. Visual contact."

The twin squad cars screeched to a halt in the intersection. Four officers and one "federal agent" took their positions around the vehicles. Their weapons, 12-gauge assault shotguns, were trained on The Wildcat.

"Hold it!" one young officer cried. "Put d-down yer weapon and p-put yer hands on yer head or... I-i'll shoot."

"Cool it kid," a more experienced officer grunted.

"Stop where you are!" the federal agent barked.

"Agent N-north," Wildcat stuttered in his mechanical growl, "I see you have a b-b-bigger gun."

At that moment, the agent seemed to notice the creature, perhaps because it was crawling to its feet. The little man dropped his weapon and turned to run.

The resulting blast and ricocheting pellets were the only prompts required for the edgy young officer. He began firing wildly at the merc. In the ensuing chaos, the other officers opened fire. Scarce buckshot found the intended target. And DA was impressed to see every successful shot spatter harmlessly off the armored merc. Understanding settled on the officers slowly. Unsettling silence followed.

"DA, DD. Blue bird in-bound. Plus, three nosies with orders to lift."

Distant and soft, the bass thumping of the police chopper was audible in the ranged microphone's feed. An active airborne searchlight soon flickered over the street in the distance.

"DB, DA. Keep low. Hold position."

"What the hell? Uh... I mean... DA, DB... Uh... What the hell?"

"Do you have a problem DB?"

"Uh, Adjust your cam. Max res. Five blocks."

DA scanned the distant intersection carefully. He could see Agent North, his back pressed against the stucco facade of a short office building. But a second figure was in front of the agent, confronting him.

The second figure was adorned in the blue uniform of Black Mesa security. His body armor was different, however. More like the new Powered Combat Vests that CRI personnel wore. It was military quality body armor.

Abruptly, the guard thrust his left hand at the agent's throat. He shifted his weight and hefted North from his feet.

Then DA understood his subordinate's astonishment. The guard had turned enough for his void-like skin to become visible.

The shouted exchanges between police and merc had distracted them from the apparent threat. Even the writhing agent's gasping screams were mute beneath the approaching chop of helicopter blades. The duo eased into an alley unnoticed, one carrying the other.

"DT-One to Two-oh-five," DA rasped. "Request new target designation."

"Two-oh-five. Targets confirmed. Designate Gamma and Delta."

Targets? "Uh... Say again Two-oh-five."

"Five blocks north, target Gamma. Four blocks north, target Delta."

Four blocks. Near the police controlled intersection. DA began sweeping the contours of each building for the unseen target. "DD, DA. Why haven't you called these targets?"

"DA, DB. I got him. Sixth story, glass face."

It was ugly. Spikes and bones. Crinkled flesh and eyes that seemed to glow. Lots of orange eyes. The new creature was so well concealed, DA could barely make out its gnarled features with the aid of his night vision lenses. Were it less repulsive, he might have missed it altogether.

Remarkably, on the street below, Target Beta seemed to notice the new creature. The twelve-foot beast reacted with noticeable curiosity.

"Two-oh-five to DT-One. SkyLight registers an energy flux at target Gamma. Could be a portal. Maintain observation."

"Understood. DD, DA. You slip'n girl? That's twice."

There was no response.

"DD, DA. Comeback."

"Two-oh-five to DT-One. Sensor ghosts identified in your sector. We register flat lines for DC and DD. Remote transmit and investigate."

"Understood." DA paused for a moment to consider the possibilities. Equipment malfunction. Transmitter interference. Or two of his team members were actually dead.

He withdrew a small transmitter from his suit. With the camera detached from his headset, he prepared the transmitter. DA then readied his rifle and started toward DD's dumpster.

The woman sat slumped against the parking garage wall. Her equipment littered her lap. DD was as rigorously trained as the rest of DT-One. She knew better than to sit down during an open air mission.

Such a pose could have but one meaning. DA approached slowly to confirm his suspicions. He turned the young woman's face to better examine the bullet hole in her sloped brow. Of course, the back of her head had exploded on the concrete wall.

"DT-One to Two-oh-five. Looks like we've got sniper here." DA backed against the dumpster and crouched. He needed to find cover.

"Two-oh-five. Copy that DT-One. Be aware. Sensor ghosts, eighteen

meters at your twelve o'clock."

DA was about to move when he saw the glint of their armor. It was then that he knew he had no recourse. At least the end would be fast.

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Doctor Colt brushed her fingers through her blonde hair. It was a nervous habit that she had picked up in high school. It had been a subtle means to physically express her concern, yet maintain an "alluring" demeanor. It was silly but effective.

In college, she had taken a greater interest in science. That was when she delayed her concerns about the opposite sex until "later".

Fresh out of university with a biology doctorate, specifically micro-biology and advanced cellular studies, she had been giddy the night CRI had offered her a position. She had never anticipated that the offer required a three week physical and weapons training period.

As she examined the four monitors before her, Ellen understood. She had finished her final training session and returned to her company dorm mere minutes before the phone rang. Doctor Weller, CRI's founder and head researcher wished her to participate in a specimen study and capture operation.

Doctor Colt had accepted the offer gleefully, but regretted the decision when she encountered the security escort team. A mini-gun equipped APC and a dozen well armed "guards" waited beside the research van.

Ellen had reacted with visible hesitation, but Doctor Weller assured her that everything was okay. He also hinted that Doctor Colt could be treated as a liability to the effort should she refuse to complete her tasks. Thus, Doctor Colt had cooperated and spent nearly twenty minutes stroking her hair.

Doctor Weller and his other scientists were in constant motion checking equipment and preparing a gurney. Radio signals reported various tidbits of information including the sniper report.

Doctor Weller had given Ellen a simple duty. She was to monitor the camera feeds from three well placed vantages. She had witnessed The Wildcat's apparent victory and the emergence of limited police muscle.

"DA is flat line," the much older Doctor Hillcot said. The only other woman in the van, Doctor Hillcot had been monitoring vital signs for the scouting security team.

Doctor Weller was leaning over a console with a radio microphone pressed to his chapped lips. "DB, report. What do you see?"

"Stand by," a crackling voice replied. "Visual. It's an ERCU scout unit. Probably after Wildcat."

"Or maybe that's why he's here," Weller grunted. "He does seem to

follow those things around. DB keep out of sight."

"DB is flat line," Doctor Hillcot sighed.

The van slowed to a stop. Its engine died. Only the sound of the monitoring equipment remained.

"No matter," Weller said. "We're here. DT-Two prep for capture. Target Alpha is primary. Hold for my signal."

Doctor Colt was nauseous. Four people were dead and Doctor Weller did not care. They did not matter he said. Ellen returned her attention to the monitors.

DA's camera had faded with his vital signs. Whoever these ERCU people were, they did not want any witnesses. The second monitor revealed a surprise however. The police officers that had attempted to confront The Wildcat were hastily scrambling into one squad car. As the cruiser sped away, the vigilante claimed a shotgun and took cover to make another stand by himself.

With a hint of disgust, Doctor Colt addressed Doctor Weller. "Sir. Something's happening."

The sensation of his presence above her shoulder produced a shiver. Instinctively, the woman drew the collar of her blouse firmly to her throat. She stifled a sob and avoided looking at the man.

One of the remaining monitors revealed the cause of the police retreat. Flashing lights from the police and news helicopters highlighted the massive target Beta. It was a horrid, ugly creature.

Strangely, the beast was slowly scaling the face of a building. The windows shattered easily, but steel girders held its weight. It was approaching the Delta target with menacing ease. But the much smaller creature remained frozen in its crevasse.

Ellen was convinced that the ugly little creature would be obliterated. Even as the Beta target extended its right paw the smaller beast remained unwavering. It would be such an easy kill.

The sudden steady beam from the squad car's searchlight drew a gasp from the woman's throat. Apparently, the vigilante too had taken an interest in the new creature. He stood beside the police cruiser in quiet observation.

The two creatures remained dormant. Doctor Colt could not escape the instinctive feeling that the monsters were communicating. After two minutes of unending focus, the smaller creature accepted the Beta targets paw.

"Amazing animals," Doctor Weller sighed.

"Sir," a dark skinned scientist called, "sensor ghosts in..."

The Wildcat's spotlight exploded. Flashing searchlights from the choppers above caught reflective glints in their path. Then the blare of gunfire overwhelmed the audio system. Ellen could feel her heart

throbbing as the swarm of muzzle flashes unleashed a blaze of hot metal on the squad car. Bullets ruptured against the vigilante, but slammed fist sized holes in the cruiser.

"DT-Two," Doctor Weller said into his radio, "ERCU Scouts confirmed. Let's wait them out here."

Sweat dribbled down Ellen's cheeks and brow. Bullets. Lots of them. Even the two monsters seemed to understand the need to flee. Both creatures leapt out of her monitor's view and disappeared into the city.

The dark skinned scientist chimed in on queue. "SkyLight indicates targets Beta and Delta are fleeing... uh... together. Headed north. They could be headed toward the city dump."

"Understood," Weller said in a sickeningly calm and understanding tone. "They could be responsible for those explosions earlier... And those missing police officers. It would fit with his behavior so far. Keep a fix on Alpha and Gamma."

Panic began to take hold of Ellen. Doctor Weller was obviously sick. A perverted freak that got off on the deaths of others. She just wanted out of the van. She no longer understood any of the events leading up to that moment. She wished, for the first time in her life, that she had stayed a little more interested in boys and a little less concerned with science.

## 7. A Bad Situation

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 6 - A Bad Situation<em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>Decay. A pungent, sour odor. It was a mingling of the smell of rancid foodstuffs and the stink of putrid humans. Beneath the weight of the odors, the creature could barely focus on his surroundings. <p>He surveyed the city landfill. It was a sprawling wasteland of garbage heaps and shanties. And there, amidst the rubbish, stood a steaming pile of volcanic ash and rock. The creature's new hunting partner, Shk'Rha, had strange taste in nesting sites.<p>

The scent of evil hung in the air about the smoldering heap of soot. Two abandoned police cruisers guarded the perimeter. Both cars appeared unharmed, but traces of blood and tattered garments littered the threshold of Shk'Rha's den.

Shk'Rha lingered behind in the city streets. For someone so small, he was surprisingly slow. In his absence, the beast decided to explore his newest surroundings.

The first, most glaring inconsistency in the junkyard was an absence of anything child-oriented. No species was without offspring. And offspring learned by playing and breaking anything with which they played. Plus, young often produced various remarkable odors and

byproducts as they learned to consume various types of nourishment.

The creature could find barely a trace of youth amidst the garbage. A handful of children for the entire town. Either the humans had become experts at concealing their offspring, or the city was filled with sterile old humans and barely a dozen mating pares capable of reproduction.

With a bit of digging, the creature's canine snout detected a flatulent mesh of smells. Each was more disgusting than the last. He found it strange that the humans could be so caustic. Still, he had to admit that the only valuable debris in the mounds of rubbish were chunks of metal and rusted vehicle hulls. With a little work, primitive weapons or transports might be plausible constructs for the scrap.

Then he noticed a tiny crusted metal shape. It looked like gold. The beast stood and wiped a few bits of waste from his nose. He considered the shanties for a single moment, but dismissed them as discarded homes. More trash by their appearances.

The only lively structure was Shk'Rha's volcanic mound. He called it his altar. But would the imp have carelessly discarded such an artifact? The creature gathered his discovery and started for the molten heap.

After only two steps he heard the snarling voice of the demon, muffled minimally by distance. "Wait! Don't... go over... there yet." The imp was gasping for air spastically.

Apparently he really was running and bounding with his best speed. It was sad. A pitiful display. Still, the creature waited. When at last Shk'Rha finally arrived, he was visibly winded.

"Wait... I need to... speak with my hydras. I need... to inform them... of our alliance. Unless you... want them to burn your tail. No offense."

The creature cast a glance at his stub-like tail and snorted a firm harrumph. He watched Shk'Rha approach the mound. Bursts of lava flowed from the sides of the altar. But they were not mere founts of molten rock.

The blazing figures took form quickly. Beasts that looked as though they might give proper challenge in battle. Snarling creatures dripping with liquid fire. Shk'Rha too seemed to ignite, glowing red and hot.

A moment later, the hydras splattered back into the mound and Shk'Rha returned. "The alliance is set. My hydras will no-longer view you as foe. Make yourself at home. Pardon the mess. It is a junkyard after all."

"Indeed," the creature growled. "Where can we best draw our plans?"

"Perhaps inside my altar. Unless you would rather a different location."



"I may," the beast grunted in disgust. "Tell me, what do you know of this?" He offered the gold figure to Shk'Rha.

"I don't know anything about that. Looks like some kind of idol."

"It's more than that. I can smell the power. More. I can sense it. Feel it burning."

"Who is it then? It must be someone. Don't you think?"

"I don't know. But... In my mind... I can't remember anything of my path to this point beyond this evenings hunt. But I know this. How... But I know this. I recognize it from somewhere. It looks like... Cthulhu."

"Check... hell... what?"

"Cthulhu. He was priest to the elder gods. Shub-Niggurath for instance." The creature's growl had become a soft, thoughtful whisper. His primal instincts had subsided for the moment. He was entranced upon the golden figure. He gently polished the muck away with his paw. "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhaagu. This is used in a summoning ritual. Perhaps that is why you are here. Someone summoned you."

"Summoning? That would make the most sense for this welcome excursion. But who would summon me? There are far more powerful demons than I."

"And from the sunken city of R'lyeh, the seeker travels."

"What?"

"I don't know. That's what I felt like saying. Don't forget, I can't remember anything beyond this evening."

"Strange," the imp seemed perplexed, but uninterested. He scratched himself violently and grunted. "Damned amnesia. I'm tired of this talk. We must make our plans and attack post-haste. My hydra's collected a small bounty of surplus energy for me. I want to use it."

The beast saw an opportunity. "Fine," he said as his growl returned. He palmed the statuette and continued. "Let's go back to the labs I escaped from earlier. It smells better, and there might be something of use to us there."

"Okay. But let us hurry. I'm growing loathsomely weary. But... not so fast. Look back once in a while. I'm not a six-foot grasshopper you know."

The creature nodded and grunted a chuckle. He turned back toward the city and flexed his massive hind limbs. With a single bound, he crossed more than three blocks and crashed to a halt atop a six story apartment. There he waited for the bounding imp.

Mere blocks away, rapid bursts and pops told of the unfolding firefight. The black silhouettes of powerless buildings flashed and

flickered with each exchange. Curious, the beast nudged forward. Perhaps a quick detour was in order.

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The concussive force of an exploding grenade cracked windows in a near-by building. Interesting. A black-suited human was pinned down behind a police car. His foe was as yet too distant to recognize. Even as the first true flames blazed to life in the pock-marked cruiser, the human held his ground.

He seemed a fool, too stupid to move away from the fiery heap of metal. He even tried to return fire with his measly little shotgun, to no avail. He was hopelessly outgunned.

Another grenade fractured the police car and cast the man aside.

Standing at the mouth of the alley, the security guard watched in amusement. It was the funniest battle he had ever seen. He wanted to move closer. Perchance a room in one of the buildings overlooking the firefight would provide a pleasing vantage.

He turned into the alley and approached a dark shadow between two buildings. He stepped out into a second story office and approached the nearest window. The one-inch thick pane was fractured in a half-spider web pattern. It was annoying.

He rapped the window with his knuckles and allowed the shards to plummet into the street below. The smashing of glass paled beneath the overpowering racket of gunfire. The guard was satisfied. He loved the sound of destruction and death.

Peering from the darkened room, he could see the suited human now overrun by... they were not human. Machines maybe? They appeared to be some form of droid soldiers. They could pass for large human foot soldiers in thin metal body armor and helmets. But they felt wrong. There was no aura of life or death about them.

They seemed to emit only energy and signals of some kind. They were lifeless metal men. They would be easy to crush. Even the simpleton human could have defeated them, if only he would fight them like an intelligent warrior.

Still, something else was present. The guard concentrated on the power. It was veiled heavily. Concealed from him well. The machines were connected by it somehow. Controlled by it. It was something dark and menacing. He desired the hidden strength.

The guard cast his gaze down upon the exchange below. One of the machines snatched the barrel of the human's weapon and snapped it from its stalk. Undaunted the human produced a broken barrel of his own and hammered the machine's faceplate.

A metallic crack snapped the droid's head to the side as a second blow struck home. Finally, the human moron was putting up a small fight. The third blow met the waiting palm of the machine. It held fast, but the human brought a clawed fist down.

Visibly damaged, the machine released its grip on the makeshift club.

The human jabbed the metal deep into a crack in the face plate and watched the droid fall slack into the street.

Then the guard felt a change in the mysterious power. The other droids began to retreat, but he could sense something else.

The human glanced about stupidly and then seemed to stagger backward. It took but a second for the guard to notice the apparent steam drifting from the defeated robot.

Seconds later, the orange and black fireball filled the street. The office building's walls shook uncontrollably. The suited man was cast aside like a rag doll. He spiraled into a parked station wagon and crumpled the hood.

An indiscernible grin crossed the guard's null face. "My turn."

He leapt into the street below with only a mild effort. To his surprise, though, the machines continued to assault the human. They dared to ignore the guard. That was a fact that enraged him.

Then he noticed the suited figure move. As grenades struck the station wagon and tore it apart, the human vaulted with the blast wave at his back. He crashed into one of the machines and struck a series of rapid blows.

It was the first truly intelligent act the human had committed. Unimpressed just the same, the guard regarded the human's black suit. "Why do they always get the good upgrades?" he mumbled to himself. "He probably even has something to protect him from my dark gates."

As the human whipped the machine into one of its counterparts, the guard plotted. The machines seemed oblivious to his presence. Maybe a quick demonstration was in order. It might even be worth the secrets of that human's suit.

The guard thrust his fist into the air and focused his energy. "Suck 'em up!"

Arcs of dark energy drooled down the neighboring buildings. The ground trembled. Black streetlights swayed on their bases and flickered despite the lack of power.

A mass of darkness formed above the street, swirling and drawing the droids toward it. Yet something was amiss. The machines were not helplessly spiraling into the void. Sparks spat from the ground as each machine scraped slowly backward.

The human was easily out of range, as were a few of the droids. It was understandable that they would continue their own battle, but the closest droid had yet to even acknowledge the gravity that clasped it.

Finally, it lifted from the earth and spiraled into the mass. The second drifted lethargically into the vortex a few moments later. Frustrated and somewhat drained, the guard allowed his attack to subside. The remaining machines dropped to the pavement and continued their assault on the suited human.

How could the machines continue to ignore him? The guard was indignant. He slipped his handgun from its holster and targeted the head of the nearest droid. The shots deflected easily, but dints began to appear in the glimmering metal.

A thunderous explosion drew his attention to the human. He had eliminated another droid. The guard counted eight remaining machines and grew frustrated. He holstered the useless glock and charged the target.

With droid in hand he plowed into a neighboring building. The lobby indicated an occupied apartment building. Pleased to find an audience, the guard gripped the machine's head and pounded it into the floor.

Waving his hand as a magician, he summoned a small, concentrated orb of dark energy. The humans were hiding of course, but he knew they could see. He hefted the droid and plunged the orb through the faceplate. The machine shuddered and fell limp.

The guard watched the steam begin to billow from the metal body and then sprinted back to the street. The explosion rocked the building and gutted the lobby. Shrapnel and pieces of soft debris peppered his back, no match for his prototype PCV.

He grinned sadistically. The combat in the nearest intersection quickly returned his attention to that suit and to the strange power behind the machines. The droids were stronger than he had expected, but they were still toys. Inquisitiveness overwhelmed him.

"You there! Useless!" he called to the man. "What are these droids? Where do they come from? And how did you get that suit?"

The man was firmly in the grip of a droid. He wrestled a hand free and drilled it through the droid's arm. Tearing the metal appendage free he bashed the machine into submission. A single firm jab of his claws shattered the droid's faceplate.

"I asked you a question."

"I heard you," the human replied in a threatening mechanical growl.

"DO YOU DARE IGNORE ME AS WELL?"

"I'm a bit busy."

\*\*\*"TELL ME!\*\*\* The guard was not nearly as angry as he played his emotions. He was amused by the lowly human pretending to be a worthy opponent.

A grenade blast caught the human in the chest. He tumbled backward and was swarmed under by droids. Aggravated, the guard lunged for the machine that he believed had fired the grenade.

Cracking supports and whining metal were subordinate to the firing automatic rifles. The machine seemed unaware that its left leg had been severed. It maintained perfect balance and continued to fire at the human.

Amused no longer, the guard placed a crippling scissor kick through the machine's chest and retreated from the ensuing explosion.

Laughter. The guard turned to face a single droid. Its eyes had a fire behind them that the others lacked. Surprised, the guard restrained himself. He focused on the glow and realized that he was looking into a subdued aura. Something was using the machine to communicate.

The laughter faded and then the bass grumble of an ancient voice filtered through. \_"--Dark Shadow."\_

"What the hell?"

\_"--Do you seriously wish to task me child?"\_

"Who are you? How do you know my name?"

\_"--You cannot believe yourself worthy of me."\_

"I ASKED YOU A QUESTION! YOU'D BETTER QUIT IGNORING ME!"

\_"--I have heard your question boy. Do not think yourself my equal. I come for Wildcat alone. You will have your own time."\_

Dark Shadow was angry, yet dumbfounded by the machine. He could feel the truth in the droid's words. He could also sense the sudden increase in the mysterious power. Something had changed.

He focused on the sensation. Then comprehension found him. The power was coming closer.

"Did you hear that boy?" he called to the embattled human.  
"Something's coming this way and it wants to kick your ass!"

Content, the guard retreated into darkness to watch. He stepped back into the second story office with certain satisfaction. He was about to meet the real authority in this battle.

He shuddered unexpectedly. Something else. Dark. Evil. Powerful. He diverted his eyes from the hapless man and his remaining enemies in standoff. It was above. On the rooftops. It was not the mysterious power he had felt. It was...

"I thought they had left," he grumbled. High atop the apartment building opposite Dark Shadow, the spike covered creature and its massive wolf counterpart stood watching. The larger creature seemed to loose interest.

Nevertheless, the smaller beast remained.

Power. The guard could feel focused power. The humanoid creature was channeling energy. Excitement filled the guard as the first arcs shattered the rooftops. A passing news helicopter met with a bolt of energy and burst into flame. It spiraled into an adjacent building and tumbled blazing into the street.

The six-foot creature drifted slowly out over the street, the power

apparently keeping it aloft. Searchlights scattered when the news and police choppers fled. Darkness consumed the street save for the radiance of the beast.

Its spikes became as lightning rods. It spread its body wide drawing the energy in. The guard glanced at the street and found the human opposite the line of machines. Grenades were fired, but missed high. The human lunged.

Above, the glowing ball of white hot energy engulfed the creature. It was ready.

Static tingles coursed over Dark Shadow's body as the energy thumped into the line of machines. Windows shattered and the roar of the blast was overwhelming. The guard felt the blast wave thrust him through the office wall and into a darkened corner.

Thinking quickly, he pushed through the shadow and into the alley he had abandoned earlier. He peered around the corner and found the massive fireball expanding into the apartment and the office building he had evacuated seconds before.

The human had been thrown clear of the blast, but seemed to radiate his own energy. Sparks and bolts of energy entered him, but then flashed into the ground uselessly.

Two of the fleeing helicopter's were clipped by the blast wave. The first made a daring crash landing. The second slammed into the open street and scattered over the pavement.

As the smoke billowed and the flash of pure energy depleted, the remaining face of the office building crumbled. The apartment building was even less fortunate as its entire structure toppled into the street. A feeling of bliss passed through Dark Shadow. So much chaos and destruction. It was beautiful. A work of art.

In the haze of his pleasure, Dark Shadow watched the duo leap from rooftop to rooftop and into the distance. He must follow these creatures. He must have such wonderful power.

On the pile of rubble, the suited man was roaring with anger and lifting chunks of debris away. It was a fact that drew laughter from the guard's lips.

The machines were gone. Destroyed. Their explosive self-destruct used to enhance the energy attack. He could no longer feel the mysterious power that bound them. Possibly the little creature was the power he had felt.

He was about to follow the two beasts when he sensed it once more. It was distant, but still en route. Torn between his options, it was the glint moving down the opposite sidewalk that subdued him.

They were different. Bigger. More powerful. And they preceded the mysterious power.

Delighted, he began to count.

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 7 - Fallen</em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>What had his name been? Did it matter anymore? Had it ever? <p>It was an old name. Millennia old. His newest name was more fitting. He had exceeded his humble beginnings and created his own name.<p>

He had been a simple knight, but his mind separated him from the brethren. Experience earned the right to his first bionic upgrade. But it was lethal cunning that built his prowess among the others. And it was his ambitions that made them fear him.

An aged human, who was greatly studied in the arts of what he called sorcery, introduced the knight to the first of countless realms to which his home was border. Wielding an ancient alien artifact he dubbed a summoning staff the human called upon the knight on many occasions.

The old man was greedy and demanded the defeat of his enemies. Thus, each foe met fate in his time. Of course, the knight grew stronger with each victory. And after each conquest, the knight returned home to rule his territories as baron.

Yet he knew the want of greater power. Ultimately, he grew weary of the old human. During one final summoning, he butchered the man and collected the summoning staff.

Through the artifact, the baron found freedom. Freedom to traverse many realms. Freedom to hunt as he pleased. Freedom from the brethren's meager control.

With time, the baron's freedom brought jealousy. He had become too strong for the brethren to combat individually. The fact that he could travel to and fro with ease frightened them. Thus a legion of the brethren joined in concentration to mass one portal. Together, they dispatched a battalion of their own kind, one-by-one to face the baron on his favorite hunting world.

There, six brothers joined their powers and technology to build the Vortex Crystal. The regiment of brethren carried the crystal into battle and where confident of their triumph. Yet, always the forward thinker, the baron had anticipated their efforts.

Many insurgent forces loyal to him counted themselves among the multitude. Dissidents resided in each of the great houses and during the battle, they created strife and unrest. The great houses turned on each other, an act that crippled their attack.

The baron personally dispatched the six brothers of the Vortex Crystal. Nevertheless, as the last of the brothers drew his final breath in a cave he used for shelter, he hid the crystal in hopes that a second assault would be possible after his forces were rebuilt on their fiery border world.

Alas, the baron returned to his home territories and eliminated the brothers' shrines before they could be reconstituted. The other brethren would not dare face the baron again. Consequently, he traveled without limitation, hunting where he pleased.

However, a second party took interest in his wanderings. The ancient alien race, the Ariesians, had been plagued by the brethren and other disasters on each of their major colonies. As such, they had returned to their home world and remained in seclusion for eons.

The baron was unaware that his use of the summoning staff had been noticed. Nor did he realize the full implications of the battle he had won. Such mass teleportation to Aries' neighboring world had given its inhabitants rise to concern.

Still they might have refrained, had it not been for the Vortex Crystal. Such a weapon could prove fruitful and warranted the risk of exposure. They awaited the inevitable reappearance of the baron and struck.

Search parties scoured the caves for the crystal. Contingents flanked the baron and drew him into a crossfire that rivaled the blazes of the fiercest firestorm. Yet the baron stood. Without the crystal, the battle was for not.

It was in the waning hours of the conflict that a human champion arose. The champion, driven by the torments and deaths of his people, sought the Vortex Crystal. With an inhuman strength of will, he found and implemented the weapon.

With the human's sacrifice, the baron fell.

In the wake of that reign of terror, the Ariesians took the depleted crystal to their home world. Their desire to correct its many dangerous flaws drove them to ignore the approaching danger.

In the baron's defeat, they were revealed. The brethren knew of their home world. Teleported by the multitude, solo warriors began picking the great Ariesian cities apart.

Even so, it was a natural disaster that ultimately destroyed their world. They knew of the threat for years and had prepared to escape, but the brethren changed their plans. No colony would be safe from the monstrous beings that would undoubtedly follow them.

In the last days, they completed the great rings. Teleportation gateways that would lead to a new colony in a distant border world between the realms. The improved Vortex Crystal would protect the Ariesian colony and their people would be hidden once again.

Unfortunately, the brethren's gorilla incursion slowed progress. The Ariesians found themselves overrun in the twilight hours of their evacuation. Their great weapon was complete, but the onslaught targeted their researchers. The weapon was lost.

As the rain of fire and rock fell, the last Ariesians gave their lives defending the great rings. In a final act of defiance, they reprogrammed the rings to target each other.



Still, the brethren's warriors found the rings and endeavored to activate them. As Aries became an unlivable wasteland set afire by repeated impacts. The last of the brethren's warriors sabotaged the rings. Though the rings continued to target each other, they would connect to the brethren as a relay.

Some day, the Ariesian technology would belong to the brethren. A gift from some unfortunate soul that would reopen the great rings. The brethren would be free.

In all of the conflict between the brethren and the Ariesians, the baron was forgotten. He was dead and of no consequence. The human champion had given his life to ensure that.

But the baron was struck down before the Ariesians had removed the many flaws of the Vortex Crystal. The baron had not been destroyed, only weakened. His great powers were gone, but he survived to walk the world as a specter. He was trapped in a state of immateriality.

With time, he learned that he was not altogether helpless. He took possession of a human as a parasite in a host body. He lived on as many of the most feared tyrants the world had ever known.

He developed a new plan to regain his powers. He took many wives and concubines until one poor victim produced twins. Each infant boasted great but conflicting powers. One of dark and one of light.

With the last of the energy in his summoning staff, he dispatched the half-breed infants to border worlds that would amplify their powers.

Throughout the centuries, he gained and lost empires among men. He dispatched armies to search for ancient artifacts, but lost all gains at the end of his host's lifetime.

He watched humanity progress and waited for a technological advancement that would give him greater life.

For his solution, he again needed a woman. A scientist that believed that she might gain immortality through a mechanical body. Her efforts were funded by military contracts, but the funding inevitably fell short.

With the sacrifices of the baron's final human host, he offered funding to the woman. She developed four prototypes, each greater than the last. Each designed for military implementation. The fourth model, however, was something greater than a war machine. The artificial intelligence and processor chipset was a major advancement in technology. It was an achievement that would allow her machines to reason as humans.

Regrettably, the woman never saw her immortality. She passed with a broken heart when she witnessed the evil that the baron brought to her machines. For, though he was no longer the baron, he now possessed a superior body and the means to build a new empire.

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The Wildcat hefted a chunk of debris and tossed it aside. He knew she was dead. Everyone in the building was probably dead. But there might be a survivor or two. There might be someone trapped alive. He had to try.

He had seen the little girl. No older than twelve or thirteen. He had made a single millisecond of eye contact as she fell amongst the debris. Clutching her mother's severed hand and shielded only by a blanket, the little girl had fallen into the rubble pile near the top. She might have a chance.

But that thing. Those things. As long as those two beasts were roaming the streets, no one was safe.

Even as his rage drove him onward, his own mind began to reason out the sequence of events. Something else was involved. He had encountered three strange beings and overly suspicious law enforcement. Then the ERCU Scouts had appeared.

It was as if horrible monstrous beings were drawn to the same little city. But why? The simplest answer was power. The single most coveted possession for any monster in any species was power.

He needed to know more about the city and the nuclear blast that had first drawn his attention. For that information, he would need to inquire of the city leadership. He would follow up at the city jail. Criminals always seemed to have information that the authorities were unwilling to discuss.

He would also need a new base of operations somewhere in the city. He would need to scout for an empty building. In one of the pouches of his belt, he carried a gift. He had never used the device. It seemed too fantastic. But perhaps the time had come.

Her hand. He had found the little girl and her hand was moving. He could hear her sobs. He could sense her fear and torment. He would have pulled her free had he not heard the thump.

He spun and spread his arms to shield the girl from as much of the grenade's blast as possible. Blazing orange filled his vision, dimmed only by the protective lenses of his helmet. The crime fighter could feel himself lift from the ground. Pain raced through his body starting at the point of impact.

Wildcat crashed to the ground on the opposite side of the rubble heap. He sought cover behind a parked car and waited. Twin grenades hammered the pavement. Then the first of the machines cleared the top of the ruins.

ERCU Assault Squad. Twenty machines standing six and a half feet in height. Their glistening thick body armor and fully equipped assault rifles made them far more dangerous than the Scouts had been. And an Assault Commander with his heavy armor and mini-gun would take cover and snipe.

The Wildcat looked on with concern. Traditionally, the ERCU forces chose to shoot their targets and seek cover. That made a clean firefight possible. Nonetheless, the Scouts had taken a hand-to-hand strategy, pressing forward until within arms length.

His skin still burned from the heat that had penetrated his mask's open air vents when the first scout exploded in his face. ERC Units always self-destructed, but never with such a fierce LOX based chemical fuel.

They were trying to wear him down. The new tactics were simply intended to make him weak and to distract him from the true reasons for an ERCU presence.

He placed a hand on his hip holster. Big Iron, the trusted super-revolver of his own design. It might prove to be his only recourse. He dared not risk losing it too early in the fight.

The Assault Squad spread across the street and began the advance, rifles burning the air with heated metal. The Wildcat stood and spoke the muted command to close his air vents. He had thirty minutes of internal air supply. If the machines wanted a fist fight, they could have one.

He charged into the hail of bullets. Each shot stung like an unobstructed punch. The mini-gun's spray was the worst. It was like a crushing flow of liquid metal that forced him to slow down.

Wildcat dove onto the first machine and pulled it over him. The countless streams of bullets stopped, but not before completely eradicating the machine. Even its self-destruct mechanism had been torn apart, the explosive chemical components remaining unmixed.

The second machine was swift. It drug Wildcat aside and slung him into a brick wall. He pulled himself to his feet and countered a fierce punch. The exchange was a whirl of fists and kicks.

Another machine joined the brawl. Then another. Wildcat soon found himself pinned to the ground with the numerous machines drilling punches to his chest and head.

He was easily overpowered, but he had anticipated the machines actions. He spoke, and the nozzles mounted beneath the back panel of his shoulder pads hissed to life. The first two machines were blown apart by the flow of compressed gas and exploded atop a parked SUV.

Wildcat strained to lift his legs and exposed another machine to the stream. It snapped in two, both halves bursting high above the street.

Other machines made retreat and the loss of weight allowed the thrusters to push. Wildcat gripped twin machines under each arm and twisted for flight. Together, the three combatants streaked into a corkscrew.

As they passed the rooftops, The Wildcat altered his course and plunged headlong toward the ground. The collision was brutal, but the crime fighter had pulled up. His victims conversely were left with collapsed heads. Both fireballs scorched the nearest building and fractured its face.

The Wildcat allowed himself to lift away from the street and banked around to make a second pass. He battered his way through the machines with his claws outstretched.

It was a pain he had not felt before. He almost lost consciousness. Even as he spiraled into a brick wall, he knew. It was a flaw he had never worked out. The Assault Commander's mini-gun had found the thinner lining of the micro thruster's nozzles.

Moments after the fragments of wall fell atop him the second compressor tank ruptured. Excruciating pain coursed down his spine.

Grenades and armor piercing rounds splattered into the debris. It was needless insurance of their success. Wildcat pulled himself free and crawled into the street. The taste of blood was in his mouth.

Through the flames of repeated attacks, he glanced back at the collapsed apartment and buckled to the ground. He almost failed to notice the new sounds. Thumps and pops, muffled by his audio filters and the ringing in his ears. He mustered enough strength to turn his head back toward the open street.

An armored personnel carrier sat parked in the nearest intersection. Beyond the APC, he could see a white van bearing the markings of the Chamberlain Research Institute. A dual top-mounted mini-gun spat fire at the machines. Soldiers wearing expensive body armor with the CRI logo emblazoned on their breast stood ready behind the APC.

Grenades were exchanged and massive levels of firepower filled the intersection. Nonetheless, it was the mini-gun turret that won the battle. Even the Assault Commander was cut into large chunks.

As the smoke cleared, lab coated civilians approached the downed vigilante. Fire extinguishers doused the surrounding flames. One young woman looked down at him with dread in her eyes.

"He was trying to help them," she said while nervously stroking her hair.

"The matter is already settled Doctor Colt," the man said dismissingly. "I'll leave the security team to help with the search for survivors. Join Doctor Hillcot in the van."

Wildcat could feel great heaviness in his chest. He started to gasp for air. It took all of his concentration to listen.

When the woman turned away, one of the soldiers approached. "Sir, they have been spotted near CRI. Should we follow?"

"No. We'll take Target Alpha to the satellite lab. Keep your team here to cover our departure. Let Doctor Fields worry about Kain and his little helper."

With his last sigh of breath Wildcat spoke. \_"Kain."\_

## 9. Fractured Reality

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 8 - Fractured Reality</em>

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>The darkened buildings of the Chamberlain Research Institute. <p>The facility was quiet, but given Kain's rendition of events, the imp was not surprised. However, he did think odd of the sterility of the compound.<p>

The perimeter fence was whole save for a section recently cut by a work crew. A single warehouse appeared to be under demolition, boasting an empty dump truck and an assortment of abandoned machinery. Only two vacant lots appeared to have been recently cleared.

"I thought you said you escaped earlier tonight," Shk'Rha declared with accusation.

"I did," the twelve-foot beast said in an earnestly surprised tone. "When I left, there were fires. I slaughtered dozens of sour humans. I don't understand this."

The duo eased toward the gap in the perimeter wall. Kain sniffed the soil and grunted. "They may be fast, but I can still smell the explosion. I smell ninety... maybe a hundred sour humans here." He whiffed the air more carefully. "And I smell their blood and fear."

"Fine," Shk'Rha snorted. "Let's go."

The imp was loosing interest quickly. He knew not how long his stay on earth might last. No matter how limited, he intended to take full advantage of the opportunity. His agreement with Kain had seemed worthwhile initially, but given time the novelty had faded.

Shk'Rha slouched into a four-point crawl. He could feel something elusive. He could sense a deception, but could not pinpoint the source.

He pressed low to the ground and inched toward the most visible building. Glittering with a glass front, he perceived it to be the primary laboratory complex that Kain had mentioned previously.

The lumbering beast was less discreet. His steps were almost thunderous. He gave no sign of the stealth he had displayed formerly. Perhaps it was a subconscious outburst, but he started growling and huffing.

Irritated, the imp turned to his cohort and glared with each of his glowing orange eyes. But the wolf-like beast sped his pace. He nearly trampled the imp as he rumbled up to the windowed wall. A below of pure arrogance cracked the many panes.

Then Shk'Rah sensed the presence. A meager looking old man approached the main entrance. With white hair and a long, speckled brow the human seemed decrepit. Yet the imp could feel the subtle difference in his aura.

A minute squeak echoed across the courtyard when the human opened one

of the building's main doors. He sighed quietly and looked first to Shk'Rha. Then to Kain.

"Kain, I'm so glad you've come back home dear boy. I was getting worried. You've been out so late this time."

Obviously aghast, the beast replied in a howling bark. "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT! WHO THE HELL ARE YOU!"

"Oh dear. That danged amnesia again. I had hoped we had fixed that this time. Kain... I'm your father."

The massive creature recoiled and staggered backward as if struck in the face with such ferocity. "YOU! IMPOSSIBLE!"

"Please, come inside. I will explain."

Shk'Rha would have preferred to rip the man's face off, but he was curious. Most of humanity would have fled at the site of the two beasts. Besides, a chance to explore the CRI facility for possible weapons and prey was a delicious idea.

Kain ducked into the building with surprising care. The imp observed his giant ally with disgust. He knew that the beast had already succumbed to the human's obvious ploy. Taking care to shatter the glass door, Shk'Rha followed.

The human walked quickly to a reception desk and accessed the workstation mounted on the desktop. Without hesitation or even diverting his eyes from the monitor, the man began to speak.

"I am Doctor Alexander Fields. As I said before Kain, I am your father. I won't rush you into the labs below due to your amnesia. The last time we did that, you reacted with certain... distrust."

"Meaning he tore everything apart," Shk'Rha hissed with amusement.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I can't possibly hope to help you remember everything Kain. But I can explain why you stormed out of here again tonight, and why you persisted in following that merc in the city. I'll keep the explanation short so we can get you into your healing chamber." As if speaking to uneducated children, the old man glanced at Shk'Rha and then said, "That is, we have a special chamber designed specifically to augment your natural healing factor. You'll be right as rain in a few days."

"Screw that, I want some action." Shk'Rha was within striking distance of the man, but Kain's paw appeared before him. A firm if not misplaced warning to wait.

"I won't deny you the chance to hunt," Fields said reassuringly. "You are not damaged the way my son is."

"Just get to the point," Shk'Rha snapped.

"My apologies," the old human said with a pause. "I once wed a beautiful woman. A colleague named Allison Millar. She was an incredible woman. And she pioneered much of the robotic sciences of

this modern era. Even the experimental maintenance droids in our warehouse sector are based on her older work.

"Allison was your mother."

Shk'Rha began to focus his mind. Something had weakened. The old man's guard was down. He began to sense something distant. Amusing.

"Unfortunately," Fields continued, "her efforts led her to work for a defense contractor. It was the only way to fully fund her research. The laboratory was on a privately held island off the coast of California. Purely man-made. Just far enough out to be considered international waters.

"But that's where the contractor began cutting corners. And eventually Alison had to establish the Elite Robotic Combat Units as her only defense against that greedy merc and his warlord employers. His name is Wildcat. Or The Wildcat. Or something.

"He destroyed the island's facilities and stole valuable technology. He also killed my beloved Alison. Kain... Wildcat butchered your mother."

Kain started to growl softly. Shk'Rha eyed his partner, but maintained his focus on the old man. Something dangerous was in the atmosphere.

"After her death, I was distraught. I began grieving uncontrollably. I don't know who is controlling the ERC Units now, but they are still active. It's probably the defense contractor or the warlords. Too bad I don't know who.

"Too bad you didn't know either. You, our only son, were desperate for a revenge you couldn't have. But I... was another story. I began work for CRI. Work on a cybernetic organism. A machine with human intelligence. Animal senses and agility. Augmented by bionic upgrades.

"Regrettably... my creation was imperfect. And the cost of your rage and my carelessness left me alone in this world.

"I couldn't bare another loss. Not you too. So, I used my creature's design and... some advanced technology... from a classified source... to give you this new body.

"Had I known that you would suffer such amnesia, I might have been more careful. But that no longer matters. Every night since your accident, you have been desperate to find The Wildcat, and believe me... I'll not stand in your way."

Shk'Rha considered Fields' words carefully. Something felt wrong or missing. He considered possible questions, but he could tell that Kain was satisfied. Fields held a vast amount of convenient knowledge. It was the quick and easy answers.

"When Wildcat started prowling the local streets, Kain had just suffered from an amnesia black-out. When he came to, he was driven only by the want of revenge against that merc. The local staff wanted to study him further and... unfortunately, they tried to stop

him.

"No harm done though. He only injured a few people and made a bit of a mess. But that didn't actually happen tonight. Heaven's no. He fled almost two weeks ago. He has since returned to come and go as he pleased on a nightly basis."

Shk'Rha honed his focus on the man. Kain was apparently awestruck and growing steadily more useless. He had not spoken since the old man began his sob-story.

The imp simply snatched the little golden statue from Kain's grasp. The unwieldy oaf was completely void of activity. His body was present, but his eyes were distant. The beast was only a hallow shell of his previous viciousness.

"Tell me pops, what do you know about this?"

Suddenly, the old man looked astonished. "It looks like Cthulhu. I thought I'd lost that. It's an... it's a piece of technology that came from the same classified source I mentioned before."

Fields reached for the statuette and produced a red gem that gleamed in the florescent light of the reception foyer. He quickly fit the gem into a mold in the base of the figurine and set it atop the desk.

The old scientist cleared his throat. Shk'Rha could feel the sudden focus in his speech. "When combined with this power crystal, the commands are spoken. Then, once charged, some form of portal is opened."

The old man froze and stared at the red crystal. Minutes passed in silence.

Shk'Rha groaned an unearthly curse and looked at the human. "He can stay here if he wants, but I'm sick of this!" As the imp lunged toward the nearest wall, he glanced back at Fields. "I give you notice now human! I spare you only for the alliance I made with that one. Heal him if you can, but fear my return for I go to hunt. None shall be safe in this facility."

Even as the imp crashed through a cracked window pain and clawed up the side of a building, he heard the old man calling behind him. "I will treat his wounds with stasis. Please, don't be cross with us. If it is a challenge you seek. Then go to the warehouse section. Our maintenance droids are out of control and something is using them as weapons against the staff."

---

The white van sped away as quickly as it had screeched into the intersection. According to the markings on its side, that impotent human had been carried off by scientists. Given thought, it made sense that the scientists would make a new base.

Perhaps Dark Shadow would have a chance to destroy his scientist opponents after all. Maybe he would even find some new enhancements and weapons.



The guard started to press into a superficial shadow behind a dumpster. He stopped only when he felt the power. It was very close.

He turned back and peered around the corner of concrete that had been his cover. The security team was well armed, and each man was clad in advanced body armor. Their transport was a heavy APC with mounted weaponry. It was a tantalizing target.

Deafening, the mechanical roar was surprisingly visceral. High atop the corner of an eight-story building, the figure was dark and hard. But even at the distance of more than a city block, the guard could sense the fire within it.

A black flame-retardant cape caught the wind and gave the seven-foot figure a bat-like silhouette. Sharp angles traced the outline of heavy metal armor. A weighty automatic rifle, drastically customized, lowered to the figure's side.

When he finally spoke with the synthetic voice of the droids, his tone was emotive and outraged. \_"--\*\*YOU STOLE MY TROPHEY! YOU LOWLY INSECTS!\*\*"\_

To the guard's surprise, the machine pitched his rifle aside. The security team scattered as the gun snapped across the pavement. Their mini-gun turret roared to life. Other automatic weapons joined the ruckus quickly.

Scarcely a dozen shots found their mark. The machine had leapt from his perch with unparalleled speed and crashed to the sidewalk below. As concrete dust cleared, he found his first victim.

Wailing, the man was crippled by a bloody impact to the groin and helplessly pitched into the streaks of tracer bullets.

As a flash of darkness, the machine hurtled to the top of the APC. Steel met steel in a grinding hiss. The spinning barrels jammed and screamed with each second that passed. Smoke began to swell from the crippled weapons and cloaked their intended target.

A second man chirped only mild protest as the machine dropped behind him and snapped his neck. His lifeless body was whipped into a careless woman that attempted to offer aid. She had only a second to comprehend the metal fist before it plunged through her night vision goggles and subsequently her face.

A leaping kick shattered the next victim's ribcage. The other humans took cover seconds before a grenade twirled into the carnage. The overshot fireball illuminated the machine as he retaliated.

The gunman was quickly slapped to the ground. His body then cart-wheeled into the side of the APC. Effortlessly, the machine ripped the arms from the next man and left him for dead.

Over the incessant rattle of weapons fire, the machine bellowed with inhuman rage. The nearest opponent was plunged through a plate-glass storefront and then impaled with her own gun.

With misguided intentions, two men stepped into the open and attempted to distract the machine. Despite several obvious direct

hits, he plunged into the gunfire and shattered the two skulls into each other.

Caught off guard, the planned flank man careened off a roundhouse kick and buckled a powerless streetlight.

Left alone outside the APC, the last of the security team lowered his weapon and barked a hasty report into his radio headset. Seconds later the machine gripped the man's face and mashed. The lifeless corps was hurtled into the slowly lowering rear hatch of the APC. Moments later, it was crushed.

Smoke billowed out of the frame. A lone man, bloody from the sparks and fire of the crippled mini-gun, stumbled into the open and brought an assault shotgun to bear.

The blast struck the machine squarely in the chest, but he stood unwavering. Gingerly, he confiscated the weapon. He then jammed the 12-gauge's barrel down the man's throat and allowed the body to collapse.

Dark Shadow was stunned. Such a grizzly slaughter stood before him. It was glorious. More so then before, he lusted after the mysterious power that gave the machine its strength and tenacity.

He stepped into the open and on approach, overheard the mechanical voice. \_"--Demolition Unit number zero zero four... clear these coordinates and then join zero zero three at the Black Mesa perimeter. Let nothing in or out."\_

Could Black Mesa still hold untold secrets? Possibly, but Dark Shadow still longed for the opportunities at the new research institute.

However, he would first demand the great energy that drove the machine before him. "You there. I'll give you one chance. Be my ally and I'll get that weakling human's body for you."

The machine stood ridged as a statue. His voice was deep and synthetic, but the ominous undertones were ever-present. \_"--Be not a fool you impudent whelp. Your time has not yet come to serve my purposes."\_

The guard was angry, but still he was pleased at the possibility of a fight. It was a chance to claim all of the machine's strange charge for himself.

"Who do you think you are droid? I'll have your secrets one way or the other."

\_"--Secrets? Dare not challenge me little one. Your dark energy will belong to me soon enough."\_

Dark Shadow was fuming. He turned his back to the machine and outstretched his arms. He focused his energy and readied to unleash a barrage of energy orbs. "YOU ASKED FOR IT! I'LL GIVE YOU ONE SHOT! TAKE IT AND FACE ME!"

He waited for the inevitable strike. It would probably hurt, but defeat was impossible. Dark Shadow rolled the orbs around on the

palms of his hands impatiently. He expected a searing strike at any moment. The wait seemed an eternity.

At last, impatient and livid, the guard spun to face his opponent and demand single combat.

He was gone. The seven-foot clunking metal heap had disappeared. Infuriated, Dark Shadow screeched at the top of his lungs and lobbed his twin energy orbs at the APC. Both blasts burned holes in the heavy armor and then dissipated.

He tried to focus on the mysterious power, but it was gone. In a blind rage, he dropped to one knee and pounded the street repeatedly.

In the distance a bass rumble caught his attention. He could feel human fear. Something big had just revealed itself to the city's inhabitants.

It was a luscious temptation. But the guard thought again about the scientists. And that human's enhancements were more desirable at that moment.

He resolved to seek out the Chamberlain Research Institute and the upgrades that he knew awaited.

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The pompous young scientist was confident. Despite the disastrous events two weeks prior, the portals had stopped. The few marines left in the facility were trapped in more distant locals. Power had been restored. And the survivors were making progress towards their own endurance in the long term.

It was true that he and the other survivors were trapped. The nuclear disaster on the surface must surely have seen to that. Nevertheless, the bunker lab was secure.

Life, at last, could resume. To the scientist, those that hoped to reach the surface were foolish. The military had attempted to silence the facility. Various creatures still roamed the outlying corridors and laboratories. Even the odd nuclear missile still stood active within the underground maintenance compound.

Another, deeper blast might collapse the core complex and indirectly the entire facility infrastructure. No. It was unwise to effort to attain the surface.

Endeavors to claim specimens previously taken for chip implantation were futile. The fact that the scientist's less intelligent colleagues believed they had recruited xenofauna for assistance was ludicrous. Xenofauna could never be trusted if simply for their own atavistic nature. They as much as any other factor would guarantee the failure of the surface expedition.

The scientist approached an old security check point sealed by a steel door. He sighed as he touched the orange emblem died permanently in the concrete wall beside the frame. The stenciled character was as a welcome mat on his doorstep.

No guard remained in the designated booth. There simply was no need. The security team had swept that very corridor during the previous week. Only scientists and security guards remained in the labs beyond. The guards were needed to secure the main access routes.

The scientist reached through the guard-booth's shattered window and entered an access code. A hiss and whir accompanied the door's motion as it retracted. Once inside, the scientist re-sealed the entrance and continued at a leisurely pace.

She was waiting for him. He longed to see her again. He had hesitated to leave her, but he needed to claim his lunch rations in the commissary two checkpoints distant.

He had promised her that he would return promptly. As he rounded a hard corner and entered the infinitesimal lab, he stroked his hand across her hard drive cover panel. All his research resided inside.

As he sat down at her console, he felt at peace once again. For a moment, he even considered the possibility that his wife might have survived the disaster and could even find her way to the bunker.

The motion was subtle. It was a shadow within the shadow of a storage cabinet. The darkened figure barely moved. It was a puff of wind and a flicker of light.

Ever oblivious, the scientist toppled to the floor and lay still in the pool of his own blood.

## 10. Rebirth

**\*\*Conundrum**

> **<span>\*\_Chapter 9 - Rebirth\_**

Rating: M

> Written By: The Wildcat<p>

\* \* \*

>The satellite laboratory was a dimly lit shack not five short miles from the fallen military base. Of course, the shack was only a facade. No one would suspect the run-down house of deviant purpose. It was an unassuming little wreck with many tire tracks freshly gouged in the dessert sand about it.<p><p>

For beneath the creaking timbers was a clustered and intricate basement. A listening post. A hideaway for defectors. A laboratory for continued experimentation in the event of CRI's failure.

On the second sublevel, an office sat quiet with door open. Wood paneling made a futile attempt to conceal the drab concrete walls. A worn green couch and faded coffee table gave little comfort to the seldom used office.

The desk sat in a corner, its hutch permanently replaced by a set of monitors and a control console. The active monitors gave flickering radiance to the dim interior.

The first screen was a placid image. The vacant desert exterior as seen from a security camera hidden in the old house's attic.

The second monitor revealed a sterile room. The black suited figure, fallen in battle, lay shackled to an operating table with hoses protruding from his facemask. Scientists in scrubs surrounded the table.

The word "mute" emblazoned in green captured one corner of the monitor. It was a stubborn reminder that the experiment's audio log was being overridden.

The third monitor revealed a questioning face. With white hair and beard, the man seemed almost grandfatherly.

Doctor Weller sat slouched over the console, his attention given wholly to the white haired man. The angled microphone of a communication headset hovered beside his chapped lips. Clutching a black pen and tapping rhythmically on the desktop, the scientist listened quietly to a question.

He spoke with a clear, even tone as if his words might be lost if he mispronounced a single syllable. "Yes. They are completing phase five now. Phase six marks the increased hormones and... aggressive behavior. We believe the contingency will be as effective as with previous attempts."

Weller paused to listen to the querying response. A subordinate entered the office quietly and tapped Weller's shoulder, an effort to deliver a freshly printed data form.

Impatient hands snatched the slip and waved dismissingly, though the subordinate had already begun his retreat to the corridor. "No. He has some form of locking mechanism inside each seam. We were unable to cut."

The scientist paused to glance at the fresh data then returned to his discourse. "That suit is marvelous. A few minutes after we collected him, a set of vents along the back seam of the face mask opened. Either he had a finite air supply or it detected that his heart had stopped and started to prepare him for medical intervention."

Apparently disinterested, the white haired man redirected the dialogue. Weller nodded and began another explanation. "Yes sir. Doctor Colt is on hand. It took some coaxing from Doctor Hillcot for her to agree to the required... preparation, but she finally submitted. She no longer trusts me, but Hillcot... being a woman and all..."

Another silent question. "Yes sir. Kain arrived at the main facility nearly twenty minutes ago. Doctor Fields has him completely placated. The data Doctor Cox collected proved quite useful.

"Kain brought that other creature back with him. But it refused to stay in the laboratory. Fortunately, it did go down to the warehouse compound. Either it will rid us of the infestation and subsequently the droid instability, or it will be butchered and we can examine the remains."

Again uninterested, the next question drew a scowl from Weller's face. His expression created creases in his skin and furrowed his brow. "No we have not seen that menace. Assuming he really does work for the government as an investigator he couldn't have escaped Black Mesa without..."

Even with the cups of the headset fixed firmly, the response was loud and violent, filling the room with muffled accusations. "No, I didn't mean... He simply has not been sighted since the blast. Doctor Peters was the last to arrive. Two small bands reported to the city early... before the detonation, but they have been detained in the secure wing of the local hospital since."

Wishing to change the subject himself, Doctor Weller posed his own question. "Uh, has the decryption team made any progress on the Government's data? Surely they know more about him then..."

The answer was firm and concise. "I see. And the government authorized its implementation on HIS whims? Without protest from the State Department? Our merc has been a busy boy hasn't he," Weller commented while tapping the middle monitor with his pen. "Still, given the current data, I do not believe..."

Silently, a pasty man stepped up to the office door. His black hair was trimmed and authoritative. His suit, blue in the florescent office light but purple in the halogen of the hallway, was free of lint and pressed smartly. He observed Doctor Weller for a single moment and then continued down the corridor unnoticed.

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Doctor McClure was grinning at her again. His comment had been dry and witless, but he thought it was funny.

Being a man he simply could not understand why Ellen was covering herself. She felt naked. The air conditioner was deliberately cooling the laboratory below room temperature. Her paper-thin scrubs were devoid of warmth and partially sheer. She had promptly realized that her chest was protruding inopportunistically.

The pre-experiment examination had been worse though. She had experienced genuine fear while standing naked beneath the drizzling sterilization shower. She could still feel the strangers inspecting and probing her body as if she were livestock about to be slaughtered.

Ellen had refused the process initially, only to face the blaring voice of Doctor Weller over a public address speaker. At that time, she had contemplated a dash for the door and a flight into the desert. It was Doctor Hillcot that truly persuaded her. She passed through the process first and insisted that it was purely for sanitation in the experiment.

Indeed, all of the science team endured the same humiliation. They all donned the same scrubs, but Ellen was sure that the men had received undergarments.

Nevertheless, Doctor Colt knew that she would cooperate or face unimaginable repercussions. She was convinced that Doctor Weller might have her murdered and then order experiments on her

corpse.

Thus, she decided to play along until the experiment concluded. Then she would slip away during the night and travel across the desert. On foot if necessary. She intended to escape to civilization and put the entire incident behind her.

Of all the scientists in the experiment, Doctor Colt was the most useless. She could not understand the reasons for her presence. She had not been briefed and her knowledge of the experimental nanotechnology was elementary at best.

Yet Weller had been adamant that she be present for the duration. Her few activities had been menial at best. Fetching vials and collecting discarded tools. Predominantly, she stood behind Doctor McClure and crossed her arms in an endeavor of modesty.

"Phase six, section three-A." Doctor McClure was a fifty-something scientist stereotype with black rimmed glasses, grey hair receding to the back of his skull, and a whiney nasal voice. He was also the chief technician.

He was tending a series of hoses fed through the vigilante's helmet. He would insert a vial and make vocal observations. Then he would order Ellen to retrieve another vial.

"This section is the most volatile. Previous subjects displayed increased hormones and... for lack of a better word... aggression. With the increased muscle mass and overall physical prowess, subjects could be dangerous if left unbound.

"Though subject Alpha is unconscious, he is shackled firmly to the operating table as a precaution.

"Doctor Hart, give me..." The lights flickered and dimmed. Blackness covered the room. Then the brilliance of florescence returned.

"Control, what the hell was that?" McClure was frowning at a security camera above the operating table.

Ellen stood silently behind McClure. For a single instant, the thought of strangling the distracted scientist and dashing to freedom dazzled her mind.

"The server indicates a brownout. Nothing serious," a crackling voice replied from the PA speaker.

McClure was visibly angered, but he continued his experiment without a complaint. "Doctor Hart give me subject Alpha's status. Doctors Welch and Smith report to the staging room.

"And before you ask Doctor Colt, no. I want you here."

Ellen felt a well of fear forming in her stomach as the two scientists exited. Dread swept over her already chilled body. Her eyes followed Doctor Hart across the room.

He was a middle-aged brute with "womanizer" written in his eyes. She feared him. Feared him as she feared Doctor Weller.

"His vitals are strong," Hart declared. "The damage to his internal organs is completely repaired. His growth has been steady. NTE mite dispersion is ninety-eight percent."

"Doctor Colt, fetch the vial labeled N-T-E-zero-zero-six-two," McClure commanded.

Ellen carefully selected the glass tube from the holding rack of the sinister looking NTE machine. Doctor McClure quickly made use of the cylinder.

He attached a nozzle and connected one of the hoses that penetrated the vigilante's face-plate. With a puff of white and a hiss of moving gases, the vial was discarded.

"Uh, Doctor McClure." Doctor Hart was instantly pale. Ellen's fear grew and she started to back away from the table.

Without glancing back, McClure barked, "Stand still Doctor Colt!"

The low growl was distinct. The vigilante's head twisted to face McClure. Even at a distance, Ellen could see the anger behind his blazing eyes. \_"What do you think you're doing?"\_

"Take it easy son," McClure said coolly. "You've been in a terrible accident. I'm your attending physician. We are trying to treat your wounds."

\_"Don't lie to me. Stop this now!"\_

"I'm afraid we can't do that son. The experiment must continue."

The vigilante began to strain against the shackles. Ellen again began to retreat in fear.

"Doctor Colt I said stop!"

She froze instep. Her eyes locked with the vigilante and she felt her body quiver. \_"Miss. Please. You know this is wrong. End this."\_

"She can't help you son," McClure laughed. "Now, I suggest that you relax. You can't possibly..."

The crack and moan of twisting metal was deafening. McClure was slammed to the floor almost instantly. With one arm free, the vigilante found leverage to break his other shackles quickly.

Doctor Hart made a fruitless attempt to access the main computer console. He never saw the hammering blow.

Ellen shrieked as the suited figure approached. He was easily seven feet in height and his muscles rippled beneath the fabric of his suit. But his eyes. His eyes spoke of desire.

McClure clasp Ellen's shoulders and held her fast. She struggled, but the man was surprisingly strong. Her body ached from his grip alone.



"Sorry my dear. This phase is always the same. The subject has simple needs. It's time you served your purpose."

Ellen was shocked. One swift tug and McClure had ripped the front of her scrubs apart. She wanted to scream. She tried. But her voice had failed.

Even through her tears, she could see the lust in the vigilante's eyes. His gloved hand rested firmly on her shoulder, the metal claws lightly pressed into her back. She closed her eyes and waited.

\_"Get down."\_

In an instant she was in the floor. She glanced up at the seemingly monstrous crime fighter, his clawed fist pressing her under the operating table. Then he turned toward McClure.

"What are you doing?" the man shrieked.

\_"I appreciate the offer, but she didn't make it."\_

"No subject ever rejects mating! No man can turn down a... What are you!"

\_"I am the darkness that fills a coward's soul. I am the plague that victimizes the brutality of the world. I am a defender of justice. I am a purveyor of vengeance." \_As if for emphasis, the crime fighter shoved McClure into a corner. Ellen watched in terror and confusion. The vigilante clutched McClure's throat and hefted him off his feet. \_"Now... Tell me what you know of this... Kain."\_

Blackness filled the room. Ellen instinctively curled into the fetal position and held her breath. In the darkness, she heard the shuffling of feet. The thump of one body striking another. Then silence.

Ellen finally noticed the glowing red eyes. They moved lazily across the room and then disappeared.

When the lights returned, she saw the vigilante first. He was standing before the NTE machine in silence. McClure and Hart were piled atop each other beside the main computer console, Hart still reaching for the controls frantically.

Ellen strained to see around the vigilante without crawling away from her cover. He was skimming the data on the machine's monitor.

\_"Nano-Technological Enhancement mites,"\_ he growled. \_"What a flowery name! No laboratory on earth has this type of technology." \_Ellen shrieked when the crime fighter turned. \_"Relax miss. I wouldn't do anything to you without your permission. You'll need one of these too. Just breathe it in."\_

He studied the vial rack and collected a pair of glass tubes. Then he offered one to Ellen. She studied his hand for a short moment and then glanced back at the metal faceplate and glimmering eyes.

\_"You were a part of the experiment too,"\_ the vigilante said before

connecting a vial to one of the still attached hoses in his helmet. He glanced down the length of Ellen's body and then continued. \_"They injected you with a variant of the same 'mites' before they started work on me. And they inoculated themselves against 'second-hand' exposure with a chemical cocktail."\_

For a moment, Ellen was speechless. She noticed the vigilante make a gentle nod toward her feet. The tips of her footwear had split open. Three claws jutted through the opening on either shoe.

Ellen shrieked and jabbed the vial into her mouth. She wheezed and hyperventilated until the glass tube stopped hissing.

Then she noticed the sound of scuffling. She turned to see Doctor McClure reaching for a safety cover on the main control console.

A dark blur whipped toward the scientist. The black weapon resembled a pair of sickle blades joined as a disk. It sliced the air and buried itself in the console's front casing. As sparks ruptured from the machine, the hand tumbled to the floor.

McClure wailed with pain. He stumbled toward the vigilante and inhaled the contents of a waiting vial.

The effect was almost instantaneous. As he sank to the floor, the bleeding stopped and new flesh began to grow over the wound. Nubs formed and would eventually grow into a new hand.

"Look... what... you've done," he gasped.

\_"I won't ask you a third time. What do you know about the creature called Kain?"\_

McClure never answered. The vigilante turned back toward the main console and began to draw a second weapon from beneath his breastplate. \_\*\*"STOP!"\*\*\_

Doctor Hart raised the safety cover and mashed the button before the second blade severed his arm. As he fell aside clutching the spurting stump, Ellen turned away.

She immediately clinched her eyes. Doctor McClure's body had shriveled into an unnatural grey figure, mangled and cracking. Softer parts had already fallen out onto the floor.

The vigilante bellowed with fury. Ellen could hear him pitch the writhing Doctor Hart across the room.

Stillness settled over the room save for her sobbing. The image flashed in front of her eyes repeatedly. The hideous contorting of his decaying muscles and bones. Pieces of dried muscle flaking into the floor about him.

\_"It's over,"\_ the mechanical voice whispered. Ellen's eyes snapped open and stared up at the vigilante. \_"Don't turn around. It's still pretty bad."\_

Ellen wrapped her arms around his ankles and tried to plead, but the words would not form.

\_"That little twerp triggered a fail-safe, but it's over now. That tube I gave you was a second set of nano-mites. This slime designed them to disable the enhancers that were already in your bloodstream."\_

The vigilante lifted Ellen to her feet and draped the shards of fabric over her exposed chest. Together they exited the laboratory.

After a few minutes of gentle sobbing, Ellen mustered a single request. "Can we leave?"

\_"Probably,"\_ the vigilante replied. \_"But I have something else in mind."\_ He produced a small metal gadget from his belt. He pressed a lone button with his thumb and held the device up to a barren concrete wall.

Sounds of crumbling and grinding filled the passage. Before long the device was sitting inside a small hole and the vigilante left it.

\_"It's a gift... from some people I helped once."\_

Without saying another word, the vigilante escorted Ellen to a small office. He helped her onto a musty brown couch and turned to leave. She started to call him back, but she knew. She knew that he had to go. He had to catch the science team before they could escape.

She never expected to go to sleep. She simply reclined on the couch and tried to cover herself with the tattered remains of her clothing. Sleeping was just an accident.

---

The steel blast door groaned and trembled with rage. Its frame shook and shed chunks of concrete and plums of dust. Beeping merrily, the access panel identified the security override and halted the massive gate.

"What are you doing!"

"This door is ready to pop. I'm not risking an accident with a hydraulic door. Not when we're this close. We can crawl under it."

A small band gathered before the opening. Two of their number wore the unmistakable shell of hazardous environment suits. All others bore simple science team clean suits. Armed with handguns and light assault rifles, they had fought for each other and for hope. Hope of escape.

"I don't know," one clean suit said, "it seems okay."

"Trust me doc," the leader replied, "it would be bad."

Carefully the HEV suit crouched and rolled beneath the door. He studied the surroundings and beckoned the others follow.

"Doctor Lee," the other HEV suit said in a distinctly deep female voice, "you first. You monitor radiation as we go."

Clutching a small box-like device, Doctor Lee nodded and crawled into the open. The other clean suits followed closely.

As the second HEV suit exited the tunnel, she found the team of scientists wandering idly among the barren wasteland of a sublevel parking garage.

She recognized only a fraction of the rubble as the parking garage she had once been assigned. Intense heat had scorched the walls and chunks of concrete had fallen from every surface. The burned-out remains of Ford Explorers and a pair of military transport trucks filled imaginary parking spaces.

"We must be close to ground zero by now," one man commented.

On the opposite side of the garage, an excited scientist began to cry out. "Lauren! Officer Blankenship! Look at this!"

Both of the HEV suited figures responded to the call. The scientist pointed toward an old tunnel. Lauren took the lead and carefully eased around a bend in the road.

Spanning an area of hundreds of thousands of square feet, the crater was a blackened pit. It was a debris field with piles of concrete and rebar jutting into the open air.

For a single moment, Lauren stared in awe of the devastation. Then she found hope above the wreckage. She had not seen the open sky in more than two weeks. The stars were beautiful. Twinkling proof that some splendor remained.

Doctor Lee staggered toward the gathering band behind Lauren. "I don't understand it," he said dumbfounded. "I can't find a single trace of radiation. Not even normal background radiation. Nothing at all. Maybe this is broken."

Lauren checked her suit's built in sensors and shook her head. "No. Not unless my suit is broken too. What about you Blankenship?"

The other HEV suit checked his readings and said, "I'm not seeing anything."

"But how can that be?" one of the scientists muttered. "We know it was a tactical nuclear device."

"And look at this devastation," an associate added.

"Actually," Blankenship interceded, "that worries me more than the radiation thing. A nuke should have collapsed pretty much everything topside and caused an uncontrolled cave in. This is so... perfectly contained."

"But what could have happened?"

"Beats the hell out of me. Lauren, take your group. Head back. Notify team two of our findings. And the people in the commissary too."

Lauren nodded and started to turn away when she noticed that several scientists had started to step delicately onto the debris. Doctor Lee

practically scampered up the nearest heap onto the surface.

"Wait!" she cried. "We don't know what's out there!"

"Get back!" Blankenship barked.

Moments later, the fragmented corpse of Doctor Lee tumbled into the crater followed by a trail of bullets. A black shadow passed over the crater and the scientists scurried back toward the garage. Belches of fire erupted from the debris field consuming one man in stride.

Huddled inside the old parking garage, fear was dominant. But no one dared speak. Blankenship pounded his fist on a concrete pillar and cursed wildly. As his cursing subsided, he began ranting. "What the hell is this! That wasn't the marines or black ops. Who the hell is trying to kill us now!"

Lauren fought off the urge to vomit. With tears running down her cheeks, she pulled herself to her feet. She turned toward the half-opened blast door and waved for her group to follow.

She had come to one conclusion. She knew that the killing would continue indiscriminately.

For that reason she would tell the other survivors every detail of their discovery. Whether or not escape be possible, it was the only choice. She knew then that there would be no survivors rescued from Black Mesa. And neither would there be hope of life inside the complex. Eventually, the carnage would claim them all.

## 11. Unexpected Setbacks

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 10- Unexpected Setbacks<em>

Written by: The Wildcat

> Rated: M<p>

\* \* \*

>For a secret base, the Chamberlain Research Institute was poorly defended. No security guards. No marines. Even the scientists seemed sparsely populated. <p>Dark Shadow was gradually becoming convinced that he would find no enhancements of any consequence. The guard screeched with anger and summoned a sphere of dark energy.<p>

He intended to level the compound for his own amusement. He prepared to strike but unexpectedly sensed an evil aura. He stood motionless in the shadow of a small maintenance building. He never actually saw the creature. Rather, he felt it passing from shadow to shadow.

The boney, gnarled creature had leveled two large structures in the heart of the city with a single powerful blast. Perhaps the humans had given him such power with their enhancements. It was a teasing thought.

He lost track of the aura as it entered a sub-complex of four warehouses. A crooked grin was lost in the void of his featureless

face. He focused on the buildings and discerned the boney creature among more than a dozen humans.

And something else. Something with power. Something dangerous. He was intrigued. His lust for new might quickly overtook his focus. He lost track of the creature, but it no longer mattered.

Dark Shadow pressed through his covering darkness and into the first warehouse. Crates and lifting equipment littered the interior. Dim and soundless, the building was apparently empty.

The second warehouse was identical to the first. Only the shapes of the crates had changed.

Frustrated, the guard was about to move on when he noticed the sliver of light. It was barely a crack in the floor. He stomped and the trap door splintered.

The guard dropped into the low tunnel and found that it descended in a shallow slope. A blast door sealed the end of the passage. And a small metal hatch beside the door seemed to conceal a control room or office for some unknown purpose.

Curious and desirous of quick answers, the guard buckled the hatch with a sharp punch. A second blow dislodged it completely. The crash of metal on concrete echoed through the warehouse.

But the office appeared empty. Computer equipment and a security console lined the room. A cheap desk provided the only cover for the cowering girl. Dark Shadow was dejected. The only guard was a girl, a scientist at that.

"You! Girl! You get one chance," he demanded. "Where can I get the enhancements that so many freaks squander in this city?"

The girl stood slowly. She was a shy looking blonde. A bit gaunt and disheveled, the girl showed no sign of fear. Instead, her face indicated relief. "You're not one of them," she finally declared in a coarse, sickly voice. "Please, help me. We can give you whatever you want."

"I want enhancements! What's to stop me from tearing the information out of you!"

"We have new technologies," the girl pled. "Genetic and bionic tools. We can offer you plenty of enhancements. Please, help us. You need us to implement the enhancements. If you hurt me, none of my colleagues will help you." The girl's tone was unnaturally defiant. She pointed to a security camera over the hatchway and then nodded.

Seething, the guard contemplated whimsical deaths for the girl. However, the possibility of enhancements fed his ego. "Very well. What do you want girl?"

"Something is... something's down there," she whispered while pointing at the blast door. "It took control of our experimental droids. They were meant for construction and maintenance in places too dangerous for us... but they weren't complete. Now... now they're using their tools to kill. They're trying to get out."

"Is that all?" the guard sneered.

"Yes. Help us and we'll give you all the enhancements you want." The girl indicated a rack of transceivers and communication headsets. "Take a radio and I can feed you information and track your progress."

Dark Shadow snatched a headset and radio with considerable resentment. He despised helping the girl, but the benefits were greater than his yearning to slaughter.

"Wait a minute and I'll open the door," the girl said as she fell into a chair and began accessing the console.

"Don't bother," Dark Shadow grumbled.

He pressed into the shadow behind a computer. The tunnel was pitch black. In the darkness, his red eyes seemed to smolder. He observed the empty passage carefully, adjusting to the blackness.

Scorch marks and welder cuts scared the heavy door. The droids had nearly penetrated. Severed human limbs and splatters of old blood decorated the tunnel walls and floor.

Pleased, the guard began to stroll down the passage. He only gave passing thought to the blast door. He could only guess the reasons for the droids to retreat when so close to breaking free. His best conclusion was that they needed to recharge their collective power supplies, if that was how they worked.

Truthfully, Dark Shadow was indifferent. He wanted to finish his task and claim his prize. He found a sign mounted on the passage wall, but the relevant label had been burned away.

"I love what you've done with the place," he quipped.

"What?" the girl asked through the headset.

"I wasn't talking to you girl! Where am I going!"

Ignoring his detest, the girl responded. "The main hallway will lead you to a sub-level interchange. A lift. Go there."

Dark Shadow could see the lift platform in the distance, but he also noticed a gaping doorway and became suspicious. "What about this room?"

"Don't both... ith that. It's just an old biological stor... ab... oth... t... ee..."

"What? Girl? Are you there?"

Static replied.

Frustrated and doubtful, the guard turned aside to enter the room. As black as the hall, the room was a cluster of crates and cages. Massive glass cylinders stood sparsely placed around the room. Through a murky fluid, Dark Shadow could see the shapes.

Some were distorted and definitively non-human. But others resembled

a human fetus. They were ugly, leathery, lifeless creatures long since stored in formaldehyde for future study.

Still, the guard was apathetic. He could see no weapons or droids to destroy. The room was a pointless waste of his time.

The white flash was blinding. Brilliant light followed by pitch black. Another flickering assault of fluorescent light. With his eyes still adjusted to the blackness, Dark Shadow felt searing pain with each flare.

He clutched his eyes and backpedaled awkwardly. In his mind, he could feel a voice taunting him. He could not understand the words, but he felt the meaning.

Something struck him in the abdomen. Another blow fell on his head. He teetered for a moment at the doorway and then fell prostrate on the floor.

Dark Shadow lay motionless for a single moment and then pulled himself to his feet. Fuming, he discharged a full barrage of dark energy into the room.

Crates exploded before him. The glass cylinders ruptured, their contents partially liquefied by the attack. Cursing and spitting hatred at the room, the guard left nothing unbroken.

"...me? Hello? Can you hear me?" The girl's voice sounded mildly concerned.

"What are you trying to pull girl!"

"Nothing," she pled. "I lost contact with you. It was like you just disappeared. What happened?"

"A couple of your pet projects tried to attack me!"

"Projects? You mean in that storage laboratory? I was trying to tell you... There's nothing in there but dead specimens."

"If this happens again... deal's off. And I will rip out your lying tongue and shove it in your..."

"Please... I didn't do anything. It must be the droids. A booby-trap perhaps. Please, the rouge droids are on the lowest sublevel."

Without another word, Dark Shadow strolled down the corridor. His fury only repressed slightly, he paused occasionally to bury his fist in the concrete walls.

When he finally stepped onto the lift platform, he found it predictably immobilized. A gaping hole had been cut through the metal floor.

It was a simple matter to drop through the opening and locate the access ladder. Rather than slowly rattle down the metal steps, the guard allowed himself to slide down the support rails.

On the lowest sublevel, the shaft had once been sealed by a thin



corrugated gate. The twisted metal wreckage was propped against one wall. Before him, the new corridor yawned blackness.

"...osing contact. They're fl...ing you! So...hing's wrong. ...e lost y...r signal."\_

"Girl! I warned you!"

Dizzying and painful, the flashing florescent lights gouged at Dark Shadow's eyes. Moments later, he felt the first crushing punch. He crumpled after a sharp jab to his gut.

Blackness returned and the guard sprang to his feet. He began lobbing energy orbs at every fixture. He left no corpse intact. Anything that might conceal his assailant was laid waste.

"I'M COMING FOR YOU NEXT GIRL!"

Static replied.

An electrical whine filled the hallway. Bursts of compressed gas and the percussion of steel on concrete steadily filled the guard's ears. Grinding treads crushed the debris.

Dark Shadow summoned a sphere of dark energy and allowed it to roll across his fingertips.

As the machines filled the passage they formed ranks. A line of skeletal machines with spidery limbs readied their own industrial drill attachments as swords. A second line of tank-like machines spread massive lifting arms tipped with steel tines. The third line was broad, heavy machines sporting fuel tanks and the unmistakable blue glow of welding torches.

Though impressive in their appearance, the machines had made one very critical mistake. The guard's pitch was perfect. The charge quickly passed through the fuel tank of one of the welders.

The machines were decimated in seconds as a wave of fire spread and triggered a chain reaction. The corridor filled with light stunning the guard and drawing curses of his own shortsightedness. He rubbed his eyes and started toward the crumbling section of corridor that remained.

Drill bits speared through the walls flanking him. The concrete crumbled to reveal twin waves of droids. Dark Shadow parried a first attack thrusting two droids through each other.

A slicing jab ripped the hem of his uniform. He spun with rage ripping an arm from its joint and whipping two other droids with crippling precision.

With speed and accuracy befitting the finest marksmen, he began pounding the machines with fire from his sidearm. Still, a blazing blue streak slit his body armor from shoulder to shoulder.

Whirling into a slicing kick, he decapitated the machine and summoned a ball of dark energy. As he dove clear of the ensuing blast, he felt the tug of a dieing drill bit in his lower back.

He rolled away as the first slab of concrete fell. Scrambling to his feet, he sidestepped a massive boulder and sprinted for the end of the corridor. The crashing rumble pursued, but soon began to fade.

As silence returned, he howled with rage. "DAMN IT GIRL! WHERE AM I NOW!"

He heard no reply. Not even static. He attempted to check his radio and found only the frayed tips of his headset's cable.

New and disgusting, the sound was a burp of sludge. Its source was a meaty fungus spread over the hallway. Dark Shadow stared at the growth. He could feel the power within it.

Raw muscle and pulsing arteries stretched up the walls. Oozing fluids seeped down the outer surface of the meat. Stringy tentacles swayed too and fro across the passage opening. It was more orifice than hallway. The stench of rot and disease filled the air.

Dark Shadow never saw the snake-like appendage that dropped behind him. The stinging bite seemed to dig at his skin. He ripped the strand of meat away with a grunt.

The other tentacles became ridged as to deny him entrance. Screaming with wrath he began slinging globes of dark energy at the meat. Each step splattered in the flesh as he barreled toward the orifice.

---

Shk'rha had scoured the four warehouses but found nothing. Nothing, save for a cowering young man that had not sense enough to flee. Feeling freshly energized as he stood over the smoldering body, he had started to feed. He was tired of looking for non-existent droids.

The old man had lied. He would be the last to go. He would watch the others slaughtered. And even the beast Kain. The lurching oaf was a fool and far too gullible. Then the old man would face...

A hallow rumble passed under the demon's feet. He scurried to the shadow of a warehouse. Even as he focused energy on his shadow-meld, he heard the thunderous crash of steel and glass.

Cautiously, he crawled up the side of the building and peered over the rooftop. He could see the dust and smoke billowing from the neighboring building. Satisfied with the potential, he scurried over the rooftop and studied the rubble.

Half of one warehouse had completely collapsed. A sinkhole had formed directly beneath one corner and the stench of flames and death wafted on the nighttime breeze.

No longer concerned, the imp relaxed his shadow-meld and leapt to the ground. Disappointed, he soon realized that no signs of life remained in the debris.

Then he heard the voice. Human. Female.

He followed the sound to a broken trapdoor, to an open hatchway.  
"Yes. I'm certain it was Target Delta. Just keep looking. Even his dead body would be useful to us."

\_"What about another collapse,"\_ a man's voice crackled from a radio.

"From what I saw here, there were two explosions down there. If he's still alive, he won't be pulling the roof down on you anytime soon."

\_"Very reassuring,"\_ came a snide reply.

"Hold on... Tracker One watch your back. I see more droids."

The human waited for a response, but none came.

She sighed and started to turn around. Her scream was chilling and luscious to Shk'rha. He clutched her chest and lifted her from her seat.

Writhing, the human swatted at his head in a futile attempt at self-defense. Her defiance was unexpected. She spat and clawed at his arms.

He twisted her from side to side examining her closely. She was strangely different from the other humans. Not only did she fight with much ferocity despite her weak and tiny body, but the imp could sense something in her.

His grip relaxed allowing the human to tumble back into her seat. He leaned close to her face and placed his gnarled claws on her belly. Then he felt it.

He ignored the spit and scratches she raked over his leathery face. After a few moments, the human seemed to realize that the creature's intentions had changed. She allowed her body to go limp and stared at the demon's many orange eyes.

"You are with child."

"No. I can't be," the human protested.

"Fortune is with you this day. I cannot destroy this body. For your son will sire the lineage."

"I can't have a son. It's impossible. They purified me and sterilized me. I underwent the genetic alterations."

"Hear me woman, for my words are true! You are with child. Your son will sire the lineage. It is because of the alterations of which you speak that you were so easily claimed.

"The son of your son's son will be the one. Flee this place. Have your child and hide him from the people of this world."

With that, Shk'rha released the woman and scuttled back to the surface. He absentmindedly strolled into the open court between the four warehouses and then realized his mistake.

The skeletal machines attacked first. He deflected the first with a wave of his hand and sliced the second with his claws. Leaping back to safety, he focused his energy and summoned a blazing orb of flame.

Heat seemed to splatter from the droid as Shk'rha's attack found its mark. He summoned another ball, but saw the lifting time to late. His severed arm fell atop the droid and the fireball burst.

Clutching his stump and glaring at the swarm of machines he felt his energy waning. Four skeletal droids stood before him. One tank-like droid stood to his right. And three droids with welding torches stood in a semi-circle to his left. His fiery attack had barely left a few blackened marks on the machines.

Then he felt her. He turned to see the human watching with fear. Only seconds passed, but the woman seemed frozen. At the moment Shk'rha opened his mouth to bellow a warning, the woman turned and ran toward the main laboratory.

Three droids gave chase while the others mounted a final offensive against the imp. He watched the human and batted droids away with his remaining hand. Desperation filled him.

In that final moment, he summoned his strength and drew all of his energy into focus. He roared with vehemence and a pulse of energy pitched the droids away. The three pursuers immediately turned back to assail the imp.

Shk'rha had never felt such strength. He could feel the muscles stretching and tightening. Arcs of energy flowed into him from the buildings and ground. His spikes were enveloped in flesh. The sudden burst of pain forced him to his knees.

Then the air thinned and he stood. Towering above the little machines, Shk'rha felt a surge of energy. He was ready.

He wrapped his claws around one of the skeletal droids and began pounding the other machines. The lifter plowed forward to gore him, but he sensed the attack and slammed his makeshift club over the aggressor.

Summoning his blazing attack, the green ball of plasma sizzled through one of the welder droids, detonating its fuel.

Growling with rage, he pitched one droid helplessly aside and hurled a second plasma ball. His welder target ruptured and bathed two other droids in flaming shrapnel.

The last of the skeletal droids fled unexpectedly. The hell-knight thundered after his prey. He closed the gap quickly and snapped the machine into the perimeter wall with a flick of his wrist.

He stood over his victory for a single fleeting moment. Then a doubt filled his mind and he recounted his opponents' number. His reaction came too late as the sizzling torch began cutting into his back.

He struggled to reach the machine, but it was too small. It had clasped firmly to his back and was barely out of reach. As the cracking and burning sensation spread, he saw the torch burst through

his breast.

He collapsed to the soil of the courtyard and lamented his defeat. Even as a mighty hell-knight, he had been conquered by a little man-made appliance. He felt the ignition and burning of his flesh as he was pulled back toward his border world for reconstruction.

But there was something else. He could feel the very energy of his death being channeled by something... powerful. Perhaps, even in his defeat, he would have some revenge.

---

In the star filled New Mexican sky, the black aircraft were but shadows. The thumping of their rotors was lost in the vast distances of the open desert. High above, a team of personnel monitored radar screens and reported their findings. Working as one, all of the units progressed toward their objective.

Aboard one of three black Osprey transports, the team of operatives sat in silence. Their orders given, they waited patiently for the command to land.

Outside, their Apache escorts buzzed impatiently, ever mindful of the night sky and desert sands. Drifting almost silently beyond, a small team of black Comanche ghosts guarded the mission with such lethal intensity.

\_"This is it, so listen up!"\_ the commanding officer's voice blurted into each operative's headset. \_"I know this is not SOP, but too much has happened to play this by the book. I want voice logs of this one. Video too."\_

\_"Operation Cumulus is a go. Cloud Team, watch the sky for any unauthorized aircraft. Breeze Team, the Comanche program was officially canceled for budget cuts. You don't officially exist so keep it that way. No witnesses. Sprinkle Team, get down and up fast."\_

\_"Your job is purely recon. You are not a combat unit. Repeat, this is recon only."\_

\_"Red Sky, take over."\_

\_"Copy that,"\_ a new static shrouded voice acknowledged. \_"LZ is clean. Satellite imagery indicates... uh... Sir, the crater has seen definite heat since the last image. Recommend a Predator low-level pass."\_

"Negative Red Sky. We're seeing the same images. The LZ is confirmed clean. Two low-level and three high-level passes have already been conducted. Proceed."

\_"Copy that."\_

A mild updraft shook the transport, but none of the operatives moved. Their training demanded perfection. Silently, one of the operatives gestured with his free hand. Immediately, the entire squad checked their weapons one last time.

\_"Sprinkle One,"\_ Red Sky ordered, \_"LZ One-One-Two-Six. Sprinkle Two, stand by."\_

The Osprey slowed and began to shudder as it prepared for vertical descent. The Apache escorts formed an aerial perimeter. A firm jolt shook the transport as it sank.

The squad leader stood and held himself steady beside the cockpit hatch. On his signal, the other operatives stood and stormed out of the aircraft.

\_"Sprinkle Two, proceed."\_

He slipped behind a large concrete slab at the edge of the crater. He motioned for a subordinate to take point. As he watched the squad advance, he monitored the approach of the second Osprey.

\_"\*\*"OHMYGOD!"\*\*"\_

\_"Red Sky? Do you copy?"\_

\_"Rain Maker this is Cloud One! I have a definite fire ball in my two o'clock position. High Altitude."\_

\_"Copy that Cloud One. We've lost Red Sky. Sprinkle Team get those birds in the air now!"\_

As a javelin of light, the missile passed through the Osprey's cockpit. The explosion was tremendous, tossing the bodies of the second squad aside.

\_"Cloud One watch your six!"\_

The fighter was a black streak. Its delta shaped wings and dorsal fins blotted out the stars for an instant and then vanished into the night sky.

\_"Shit! Breeze Three he saw you! Move!"\_

A burst of flames in the distance silhouetted another of the stealth attackers.

The squad leader gestured for his team to take cover. Moments later an Apache flared with life, his missiles targeting an invisible attacker.

Flaming into an arch of debris, the attacker shattered into the sand beyond the crater.

\_"Good shot Cloud Four! Now move!"\_

The roar of a jet engine swept overhead.

\_"Move kid!"\_

A second Apache ignited a barrage of missiles. The attacker burst into flames but remained in the air.

\_"Oh my God! Sprinkle Three, get out'a there!"\_

The warning fell short. The flaming jet plunged into the fully loaded Osprey and bathed the desert with fire.

\_"Breeze Two! Coming up on your five o'clock!"\_

\_"Sir, Cloud One. I've never seen a jet move like that! Who..."\_

The spiraling ball of flames dropped onto the ruined frame of an old surface building.

\_"Watch it Breeze Two!"\_

Brilliant light filled the sky. The explosion flashed overhead and radiated scorching heat over the squad.

Then the point man signaled. He had found something. Observing cover and moving quickly, the squad leader slipped up to his subordinate's side.

It was a grizzly find. Not much was left, but it confirmed the reports.

Rubble shifted at the crater's edge. The squad leader focused on the debris. Heavy steel girders and chunks of concrete toppled aside as the silhouette moved along the rim.

The sound of grinding from the opposite side of the blast crater revealed a second massive shadow moving through a pile of toppling debris.

\_"Cloud six, I've got one on my..."\_

As the flash of fire and light faded, the squad leader knew. "Rain Maker, this Sprinkler One Alpha. We have found remains of what we believe to have been a man. He was wearing a Black Mesa clean suit. He was cut apart by a mini-gun. There's not much left."

\_"Sprinkle One Alpha, copy that. Can you withdraw?"\_

"Negative sir. It's ERCU. I don't know how they managed to fool the satellite imagery. There are two of them. The big ones."

The squad leader readied his automatic rifle and signaled. As one, the squad opened fire on the closest machine. At over two stories in height, the machine's main pod pivoted to face the attack. Grenades pelted its legs as it lurched forward.

Twin missiles flared into the crater from its shoulder-span launchers. The twin gun batteries mounted on what could best be called arms drilled holes in the debris field finding targets with precision.

Then the undercarriage mounted mini-gun began to spin-up.

## 12. The Calm Before the Storm

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 11 â€" The Calm Before the Storm<em>

Written by: The Wildcat

> Rated: M<p>

\* \* \*

>Deep and blue, the color remained constant. His eyesight had not changed, at least not at a discernable level. But his eye was different. With variations in the available light, his eye resembled more that of a cat than a man.<p><p>

Indeed, the man in the mirror was no stranger. However, he had grown. He was more than a foot taller. His muscles were bigger too. He could feel the added strength.

With a firm harrumph, Jay Hollen rinsed his razor and placed it on a small glass shelf over the sink. A clean shave, a good shower, and a fresh meal all aided his recovery. However, he knew that sleep would be most critical. Turning back to his study, the man collected a cotton t-shirt.

The study was shrouded in warm colors. An oak desk supported overhanging computer consoles. An empty executive's chair waited patiently. Wood paneling and a fine couch gave the room the feeling of comfort.

Reclined on the couch, the delicate form of Ellen Colt watched the man's every move. She yawned and stretched in effort to remain awake. After two hours of capturing CRI scientists, Jay had returned to find the woman sound asleep. He had to wake her, but he had been cautious.

She had been fearful and surprised by the strange man that welcomed her back to consciousness. Seeing the drastic evolution of the office drove her to suspicion and panic.

Jay had taken great care to explain the FBG device and calm her. Given more than thirty minutes of coaxing and nano-technological discussion, the woman had finally agreed to see her quarters. Yet even when presented with fresh clothing, she insisted that Jay stay by her side as she changed.

To replace her tattered scrubs, Ellen had chosen a clean, black pair of slacks and grey shirt that seemed to caress every curve of her torso. She had decided against shoes upon realizing the breadth of her furry, three-toed feet.

Jay approached a pod standing across the room from his desk. Inside, the new suit was nearing completion.

It boasted no upgrades, save for a handful of safety features. It was merely intended to replace the old with a better physical match in size and shape. The previous suit had been rather unforgiving of his unexpected growth-spurts. The man rubbed his head which continued to throb from the pressure he had experienced.

He turned back to the woman, to face her gaze. "So these so-called friends of yours... are they American?"

"No. They don't claim any nation."



"Who... sorry, I forgot. Uh... Can you at least tell me what they needed you for?"

"Not really. I'm sorry Ellen. Like I told you before, I'm not going to discuss the details with you. They're a peaceful people and I think it would be risky to discuss them. Especially in light of current events."

"But I can keep a secret. I just want to understand. If they could build the FBG then surely they could..."

"I'm not going to discuss them further. The FBG uses nano-technology only slightly better than the stuff these people were using on us. I told you as many details as I could earlier. That is all you need to know about how it works and who made it."

"I'm sorry." Ellen's eyes plead for understanding. "This is just way too much for me to swallow in one night."

"I know. But there are some subjects I simply can't discuss for both our safety and the security of those that have helped me in the past. Please, come with me. I need to discuss something with you and the other two."

Jay turned toward the exit of his study. Ellen stood and clasped the man's shoulder tightly. It was not a gesture of anger or any emotion beyond fear of the unknown. Jay suspected that she was using some subconscious coping mechanism. Stockholm syndrome also seemed plausible.

In the corridor, the duo found two men waiting patiently. The first, an older black man wearing coveralls and a musty red ball cap was speaking lazily. His company was a middle-aged scientist with dark hair and an unpleasant scowl creaking across his face.

Jay nodded a greeting and said, "Gentlemen, please step into the conference room. We're ready to begin."

The conference room was small. Empty seats encircled a large table. One bulky presentation screen overlooked the room.

Sliding into a waiting chair, the glaring scientist lobbed his first accusation. "Jay Hollen. You're a wealthy man. You could have given... hell, you could have sold your technology to more capable hands. You really are just playing Batman, aren't you?"

"Batman? Doctor... Peters is it? I'm only going to explain this once. I do this because I can. I built an amusement park in my home town. I built the first of the major office buildings. I fought to bring in new businesses. I based my media outlets there. And as my home town grew, so did the crime rate.

"I consider all of my discoveries a blessing. A blessing that must be used carefully. It is a means to do good for mankind. But in the wrong hands, this is absolute power."

Peters grinned, "Who are you? Why are you the 'right hands' to control absolute power?"

"I may not be the right man to utilize these creations, but they are my creations. I will not discuss this issue further. I have already spoken with each of you and explained this issue in enough detail.

"I called you three here for a couple of important reasons. Introductions first, though. I am Jay Hollen. And I am also The Wildcat. Mister Eldridge was a janitor, recently hired and stationed in this compound. Doctor Peters is a newly hired biologist at CRI, as is Doctor Colt."

Jay took a position at the head of the table and sat. He observed both men in turn. Then he glanced at Ellen before continuing.

"I called you here because... this is an extreme situation. I have captured most of the science team that was operating out of this laboratory tonight." Jay pointed a small remote control at the display screen. The screen flickered and revealed a row of cells locked by prison bars.

"For now, I am keeping all of these people in a holding center on the third sublevel. Consider that level off limits. You will not receive access to that level."

Ellen's face contorted into a grimace. "Is that legal? They have rights." She immediately frowned at her own words. Her eyes slowly dipped to her feet.

"True, more or less. However, this is a situation I have never encountered before. For now, these people will be held down there until such time as I can securely transfer them to a proper jail."

"Serves 'em right," Eldridge declared. "From what you told me, they deserve ta rot down 'ere."

"Why are we still free?" Peters asked.

"I have been examining fragmentary data from the CRI local mainframes. Based on that information, I believe that you three are not willing participants of the experiments being conducted here.

"If that's the case, then why can't we leave?"

"I cannot, at this point, be one hundred percent certain. More importantly... something is happening in this desert. The nuclear blast two weeks ago was only the beginning. Of what, I don't know.

"The CRI mainframes were booby-trapped. When my system attempted to secure the data, they self-destructed. I only have fragmentary information at best. A few video logs and some reports have been recovered, but it is a slow process and I don't think I will ever recover everything.

"You are all free to explore sublevels one and two. This facility is secured far too well for you to do any damage. Go where you want, but respect each other's privacy. Just try to relax until this is over."

Ellen's eyes widened. "You say that like you're leaving."

"I have found a handful of references to survivors of the nuclear incident two weeks ago. The official story is that the blast was an intentional detonation of a terrorist's bomb. Why would there be survivors? I'm going into town tomorrow. I'll visit the jail and question anyone involved."

"But none of that matters to us, does it?" Peters was scowling fiercely. "You're telling us that we can't go anywhere for god knows how long!"

"In a manner of speaking. That is all I have for now." Jay stood and felt Ellen's hand on his shoulder again. This time, there was anxiety in her grip.

"Well," Mister Eldridge said as he stood, "that's no skin off my nose. The people downstairs wouldn't let me leave anyway. Said I was needed twenty-four hours a day. At least you're honest 'bout it."

Peters sharply stood and stormed from the room. Mister Eldridge waited until he was certain that the scientist had left and then nodded. "You suspect him don't ya?"

"Yes," Jay replied quietly. "According to some of the data I recovered, most of those people downstairs... they worked at Black Mesa before joining CRI's research team. So did Doctor Peters."

"I wanted to meet with each of you in the same room so I could gage your responses. Particularly our scientist friend out there."

"I don't understand," Ellen began. "I would have expected you to keep your identity hidden. Isn't that what masked men do?"

Jay shook his head slowly, his expression was dire. "Honestly? I have a bad feeling about this entire incident. I just don't think a secret identity will matter anymore."

"I suggest that we all try to get some sleep. That's what I plan to do."

Jay walked casually back to his study with Ellen at his side. He stopped short of the door and turned to the woman.

Ellen's face was that of abandonment and fear. "Please. I don't want to sleep in my... can't I sleep here? Just for tonight?"

Jay sighed. He nodded and entered the study. "The bed is in the backmost room. I'll be here on the couch if you..."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be a bother. I don't want to put you out." Ellen placed her hand on her forehead and then began to gesture toward the bedroom. "I just... I don't want to be..." A dazzling flair leapt from her hand. It was a streak of fire that lapped the door frame.

Ellen screamed and whipped her hand to and fro in a panicked attempt to douse the flames at her fingertips. Jay patted out the flames on

the wall, still startled by the burst of energy.

As he turned back, Ellen threw her arms around him and buried her head in his shoulder. Beneath heavy sobs, the woman produced a muffled plea.

"Okay," Jay relented. "I'll be right here."

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Hollen was a fool, an insect that was trying to stand in the way of progress. A man as wealthy as Jay Hollen had no need of such technology. He was just playing hero at the expense of the human race.

However, he would rue the day of his great greed. The counsel would see to that. In the mean time, Doctor Peters decided to explore the newly remodeled satellite laboratory. He knew that somewhere in the little compound, he would locate a powerful new technology.

Conceivably, he could even find the secret to the rich man's body armor. If nothing else, he would search for a way to communicate with the scientists trapped on sublevel three.

For the most part, the layout of the satellite laboratory was unchanged. The offices had been refurbished with new furniture and more decorative interiors. Plus, several rooms had been converted into housing quarters.

The halls were more sterile, boasting metal paneling with plastic baseboards and flat LED strips for lighting. Most importantly, though, the internal lifts were still fully accessible.

Peters stepped up to an elevator and pressed the call button. The doors split open with a hiss. Inside, the button panel had been replaced with a touch-screen monitor. He pressed the icon for sublevel three and waited.

The panel flashed red and an error message appeared. Frustrated, the scientist stepped back into the hall. His next option was to locate a communications console. For that, he believed he would need to find the security control center.

Then he saw him. The brilliant blue of the business suit was unmistakable. In that single moment, he aborted his previous intentions. He had been briefed on the appearance of the government agent.

Nothing else mattered. Stopping the blue suited menace was top priority. On seeing the man turn down a side hall, Doctor Peters sprinted to the junction. He raced around the turn, but found only an empty corridor.

Undaunted, he continued to jog down the corridor to the next intersection. There he faced a three-way dilemma. However, he could see the loathsome Mister Eldridge mopping the floors in one corridor. Therefore, he chose to continue to the next juncture.

He quickly reached the t-junction and turned left on a whim. To his

dissatisfaction, he found himself facing a wall. He doubled back to the t-junction and stopped.

Eldridge was standing in the corridor, mopping the floors. Outraged, the scientist pushed past the old man. "What the hell are you mopping the floors for? They're spotless."

"I like to do somethin' productive. Keeps my mind off'a bein' cooped up."

"If I catch you following me again..."

"I'd watch that tone if I's you. You never know who might be listenin' in a place like this."

"Screw you boy! I..." The blue suit vanished around the corner. Peters scrambled down the corridor, his threats to Eldridge forgotten.

As he rounded the corner, he watched the suited man enter an office and quickly gave chase. The possibility that the government man had taken an office in Hollen's new base fed the scientist's desire.

He could confront the man and undoubtedly find a communications console in the same room. Doctor Peters rushed into the office and scanned the room.

But the room was empty. He began pulling at light fixtures and furniture in hopes of finding a secret door. Alas, the search was a fruitless waist. The office was almost identical to all other offices in the satellite laboratories.

Dejected, the scientist turned back toward the door and froze. Standing in the hall, the blue suited figure was watching quietly. "YOU!"

The man walked casually forward. "I must apologize for my littllle... disssplay. I would not normally engage in such childish gamesssâ€| but I needed to speak with you in private."

Peters searched the room for a weapon. Any blunt object. "You! You!" He wanted to say more, but his scientific mind had given way to his primitive urges. His augmentation had taken over.

"Unfortunately, I'm afraid I must be the bearer... of bad newsss. You see, there are a great many aaassets that I must oversee. Assets for which you have become... a liabilityyy."

Peters never heard the carefully chosen words. He was frantically scouring the room for anything. At last his gaze settled on the office chair. Hefting the furnishing above his head he screamed, "\*\*YOU!\*\*"

The light was brilliant. Flashes of white and green blinded him. The sensation was disorder itself. He could feel the numbness and disorganization settle over his body slowly.

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The radios had fallen silent. No further communications were received

from any of the Operation Cumulus taskforce. Peace settled in the room for a minute of reflection.

Then the General dismissed his subordinates. He sat quietly, half-reclined behind his desk. Through the nearest window, he could see operatives preparing armaments for the assault aircraft lit only by flood lamps. A towing vehicle backed into position before an immobile Apache.

It was the worst scenario he could have been handed. The nuclear blast at Black Mesa had proved to be almost completely ineffective. Survivors would surely begin the great exodus soon. And ERCU forces had committed to positions inside the base's boundaries.

A topside detonation would prove entirely useless. With the deaths of the recon teams, a direct assault had become the only option. Black operations. His finest operatives would again enter Black Mesa.

They would face death at the hands of war machines, trigger happy survivors, and possibly rouge alien and marine presences. They would enter the complex and strategically place MERV warheads for complete demolition.

Even at that moment, the president was preparing a resignation speech. The press had already given him a thorough beating in the polls over one nuclear detonation. This time, there would be calls for impeachment.

Staring out the window, the General considered his options. Finally, he lifted the receiver of a red plastic telephone and waited. Minutes passed.

When the line became active, he spoke clearly. "Operation Cumulus has confirmed survivors topside. Additional hostile forces where identified. Casualties were catastrophic. My recommendation has been submitted already. I will be waiting for your response."

He replaced the receiver and moaned audibly. He knew the answer already, but he waited for the executive order due to the complications that had arisen.

When the red phone finally rang, he listened quietly. His orders were given and he returned the phone to its dock.

He lifted the receiver of his primary phone and pressed the button to tie-in with the public address system. "All personnel, report to your briefings. Repeat, report to your briefings. Operation Cumulonimbus has been authorized. This is General Thurber."

The General then chose a third telephone. He lifted the receiver and waited.

"Sienkeitto, this is General Thurber. Operation Cumulonimbus has been authorized. The situation is grave. Assemble your team and report to me. I am activating the ETM team's contingency. I will brief you personally when you arrive."

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 12 â€" The Seeker Comes<em>

Written by: The Wildcat

> Rated: M<p>

\* \* \*

>The stink of rot and burnt flesh filled the air. Pockets of gas belched rhythmically. Poorly illuminated by a mysterious incandescence, the chamber was a festering cesspool. The meat glistened and twitched convulsively.<p><p>

As snakes, dozens of tentacles struck and jabbed at Dark Shadow. He leapt away from a fierce thrust and retaliated with another blast of concentrated dark energy. Rolling, he clipped another meandering fiber with a precision kick.

He had driven three chambers deep into the overgrowth of muscle and tendons. Each room had been a frantic battle with the serpentine appendages. Snapping and tearing the strands from their foundations, Dark Shadow had gutted each office with care.

An overzealous tentacle lunged at the guard. He snagged the strand and jerked it away from its base spewing dark crimson blood in a slender trail. Summoning another charge, he rammed it into the wound. The resulting burst of stringy meat created an aerosol of juices.

The only distraction from his rampage was the burning sensation on the back of his neck. It felt as though a flame was burrowing through his spine. At first, it had been a small bite, but the pain was growing. It seemed to spread, slowly ripping at his flesh from the inside.

On the outside, a grizzly shower of sinew and blood had started to cake his uniform. With each room, a new host of slinking tentacles attacked. Each chamber was sealed by the flesh when he approached. His only recourse had been to slam his way through each wall.

Breathless, the guard searched for his next adversary, but found none. Wary of the unexpected stillness, he flicked two orbs of concentrated power into the mass of tissue that covered one wall. The splatter of fibers and ligaments provided the only retaliation.

Dark Shadow moved gradually, studying his carnage. The scorched and broken entry point remained hollow. Conversely, he found no sealed exit. At first glance, the room was a dead-end.

Suspicious drove him forward. He traced the grain of the meat along each wall until he found a knot of tensely clinched muscle.

"That's it! Time for an enema," the guard barked.

He summoned a globe of intense energy and rammed it home. Tender, the wall of flesh ruptured sousing the guard. Screaming with newfound frustration, Dark Shadow sprang into the new cavity.

There he stood mesmerized by the cavernous room. The ceiling had been

torn open to reveal the rocky, earthen walls outside. Fragments of interior walls continued to stand, holding the chamber open. As a fungus, the meat seemed to overgrow the remaining structures.

In the center of the room, a single bulbous column of flesh stretched from floor to ceiling. Dilapidated and skeletal, the remains of human faces glowered at the guard. A few sparse limbs jutted into the room and wriggled aimlessly.

\_"...welcome... ..dahark one..."\_ It was not one voice, but many. They spoke in a unison whisper.

Dark Shadow flashed his gaze about the room, but found nothing. He then focused on the emaciated faces.

\_"...we are many..."\_ The voices were hollow. They seemed to speak while inhaling each breath. But the faces never moved.

Angered, Dark Shadow raised his hand for a blistering strike. But as quickly, his hand became numb. Suddenly, he felt a fresh stab of pain in his spine.

\_"...join ussss... ..you belong to ussss..."\_

Dark Shadow cursed wildly, but realized that he had produced no sound. He looked at the gore that stood before him. Then he forced himself to raise his hand one last time. The meat-like growth had engulfed his void skin and coated his body.

Perhaps his pride was injured worse than any portion of his body. He was simultaneously enraged and forlorn. The realization of defeat at the whims of a meat fungus crushed his spirit.

With all of his focus, he managed to force a coarse whisper of his own. "Never."

\_"...we are many... ..you belong to ussss..."\_

---

Without light, the office buildings were dark blocks that concealed portions of the horizon. Only from the top-most floor could the machine observe the prospect.

He could feel the concentration of dark energy. He had felt the wasted bursts disperse into the atmosphere. He understood that the sudden weakening was a sign of conquest.

\_"--Assault unit zero one four, activation orders. Report to Chamberlain Research Institute. Secure the target..."\_

Somewhere in the city, a room filled with metal soldiers buzzed to life. With perfect precision, the unit filtered into the street and began marching toward CRI. By the cover of darkness, they would pass relatively unnoticed.

Staring towards the wilderness, he could see a lone pair of headlights approaching the city. Otherwise, the streets were calm. Rescue crews were busily rummaging through the rubble of the fallen apartment building. It was a moot gesture at best, but the humans



were an impotent species. Fruitless labors were a way of life for them.

They did not deserve the cities they claimed. They were fools, the lot of them. Only by developing technologies had any human served a true purpose. But that purpose had been fulfilled.

The reign of his second supremacy was at hand. Even as the machine observed the flickering of flash-lights in neighboring buildings, his soldiers were marching into Black Mesa.

He could sense every machine as though he were a part of them. His demolition units guarded the crater's edge. Two assault units awaited the order to proceed. A single scout unit was already inside, searching for a feasible route to the bunker christened Lambda.

\_"--Assault unit zero one two proceed. Zero one three provide support."\_

The crater was filled with burning debris. Human tissue lay strewn haphazardly. Charred ruins dotted the rim, while blackened rubble dominated the interior.

The demolition units had returned to a sleep-like state, hidden amidst the wreckage until another force dared approach.

The first assault unit filed into a waiting tunnel. The discovery of the half-open blast door had proven bountiful. With a few strategically placed charges, the frame had been demolished allowing the seven-foot machines full access.

Close behind, the second assault unit took defensive positions. Given a signal to advance, they replaced the first squad in the tunnel. Though the heavily armored machines were elite soldiers, the machine had learned caution from past mistakes.

A stream of data entered the machine's mind. He had intercepted and decrypted a number of 'top secret' communications, but the latest carried the most valuable data. He permitted the information sink-in before making a decision. Deep within his metal body, a gnarled grin formed.

Operation Cumulonimbus had been approved. A larger military task-force would endeavor for Black Mesa within the day.

Many opportunities lay within the intercepted facts. Death and destruction would be his guide toward the secret technology of Lambda. He would gain both power and freedom. And he knew of the military's planned counteroffensive.

Without warning he was drawn from deep meditation. Pleasantly surprised, he felt the surge. It was the sensation of force. He savored the growing sensation.

The demon had been dispatched, and his shrine in the city landfill was collapsing as it was drawn invariably back to the hellish boarder world. The hydras were writhing in torture as their bodies were disassembled in a blaze of fire.

The machine could taste the release of energy. The seeker was ready.

---

In the cool light of the chamber, Kain appeared harmless. A docile puppy sleeping quietly. His face was expressionless. He moved only for small, sharp gasps.

Doctor Fields stood before the metal and glass cylinder in somber contemplation. Several minutes of reflection passed without action.

"Is she intact?" he asked quietly.

"Yes sir," a young research associate replied. "Physically, she's fine. Her mental state is another story. She keeps insisting that we conduct a blood test. She thinks she's pregnant."

"Nonsense. She underwent the same sterilization and augmentation as the rest of us."

"Yes sir. A security team is pursuing the last droid through the other warehouses. Still no sign of Target Delta."

Doctor Fields sighed and shook his head. "Consider Target Delta a complete loss as well. Damn it!"

"We knew it was a possibility."

"I know, I know. But I would have liked to at least retrieve some tissue cultures."

"Should I call the clean-up team to sterilize the rubble?"

"Heavens no Lewis! Not until we gain something from this fiasco."

"What did you have in mind doctor?"

A gleam of youthful exuberance flashed across the aging scientist's eyes. "When we revive Kain, I'll tell him that the ERCU attacked us and send him after the controller machine. What is it called? Commander? Make a note of it."

Doctor Fields brushed past his assistant and entered an empty hallway. Lewis followed closely. The overly sterile passage was void of furniture. Florescent lights bathed the walls. Chromed doors shielded open elevator shafts at the end of the hall.

Tapping the lift-call button, the scientist turned to his colleague with genuine concern. "Any word from the satellite laboratory?"

"No sir. Would you like a security team dispatched?"

"No. If something went wrong the experiment is to be considered terminated. We simply don't have the resources to devote to it. We must finish the preparations on our end by this evening."

The metal doors creaked open, revealing a dimly lit interior. Drab

fabric draped over the walls. Simple wooden handrails sprouted from beneath the cloth. The box-like service car dipped violently as the scientists boarded.

With a soft rumble, the doors sealed and the car began to ascend. Both men, hushed by the tremors of the elevator, waited for the chime that signaled their floor. The doors again squealed open. Yet, the hallway was drastically more impressive.

Ornate benches and decorative paintings lined either wall. Pine molding trimmed the plaster. Decorative and energy efficient halogen lamps highlighted the corridor's ceiling.

Doctor Fields entered his office and strolled up to the nearest window. Lewis approached quietly and peered into the poorly lit courtyard. Together, the two scientists remained patiently beside the window.

For a few minutes, they solemnly observed the warehouse complex. Hints of smoke billowed from the debris. Occasionally, the only surviving droid would appear amidst the rubble and then duck away.

Strangely, the interior lights began to shimmer. A rumble passed through the concrete floor. Startled, the scientists turned to find brilliant beams of light streaming through every seam in a locked storage cabinet. The metal began to glow with heat, igniting the surrounding walls. The top of the cabinet finally crumbled inward and the summoning statuette exploded through the roof.

Both men stood beneath the opening in the ceiling. High above, they could see the gleam of light that was the artifact. "It works!" Fields cried. "It finally charged! This could prove invaluable to our plans... if this truly IS an ancient teleporter."

Brilliant and intense, a bolt of white light stabbed the artifact. A second struck from the opposite direction. Finally, a third streak slammed into the floor of the office toppling the two scientists.

As they crawled away, a tremendous ball of light pulverized the remaining ceiling and bashed through the floor. There, amidst twisted steel rebar and piles of concrete dust, the ball dissolved into darkness.

Fire alarms wailed into the night. Sparks popped from newly exposed power cables. Weak flames licked the walls. The storage room below the office disappeared, completely devoid of light.

Carefully, Doctor Fields crept toward the edge of the floor. Lewis kept his distance, overcome with astonishment. "Look at the power!" he gloated. "We'll be rewarded for this"

> Emerging from the darkness and into the dim moonlight, the figure took shape. He stood six feet and five inches in height. Bulky and menacing, he was covered in molded plates of bone. His ribs extruded around his torso. A large and ornate emblem was carved into one of his breastplates. His skull was a composite of boney fragments that capped a skeletal face.<p>

In his right hand, he clutched an apparent spine. The backbone was chiseled into a gruesome sword.

Astounded, both men stared at the newcomer. He returned their gaze with dominating strength through vacant eye sockets. Finally, Doctor Fields forced his cracking voice to produce one memorized quote. "...from the sunken city of R'lyeh, the seeker travels."

It was a blur of motion. The seeker landed six inches from Lewis, forcing the man to crane his neck upward and stagger to his feet. He never actually felt the pain of his death. In less than a second, he had been lifted and his collar impaled on a gnarled rebar in the ceiling.

All the young man could do was panic and try fruitlessly to pry himself free. With his blood pulsing from the wound, his body stilled and dangled loosely above the pit in the floor.

Doctor Fields rolled to his feet and sprinted into the corridor. There he plowed into a pair of security guards and two fire technicians. "Quickly! We must capture this specimen!"

"Hold it sir! What happened?" one guard inquired.

The spinal blade pierced through the guard's temple and pinned his body to the wall. The seeker lumbered into the corridor and focused his attention on Fields.

The second security guard began backing away and firing his assault rifle wildly. Chips of bone flaked into the floor. The seeker nabbed the new distraction and swatted the rifle away. With considerable ease, he lifted the guard and mashed his skull.

Aghast, Doctor Fields wheeled toward the hallway. He scurried into an open office and slammed the door. A high-pitched scream of death crept down the hallway and found the doctor's ears.

He recklessly raced around the room. An oak framed sofa and a steal cabinet provided some security when pressed against the door. Still, the scientist knew that his pursuer would arrive shortly.

Fields dropped to his knees behind the oak desk and pressed a button on a black speaker console. "This is Doctor Fields. Authorization one-six-one-c. Dispatch a containment team."

\_"We have the target on video display. Containment is dispatched."\_

The door cracked under the first impact.

"Have the team report to the main garage. I want this subject captured. I'll lead it too you."

Boney fists pierced the door and cart wheeled the metal cabinet into the opposing wall.

\_"Understood."\_

As the seeker tore the door apart, Doctor Fields turned his attention to the nearest window. He snatched the closest chair and plunged it through the glass. Regardless of the fractured shards, he allowed himself to tumble out.

The scientist dragged himself to his feet, ignoring the small cuts and punctures that peppered his body. Beyond the nearest building, he could see the main garage. He ran erratically around the main laboratory and across the courtyard.

He rushed into the garage to find a single white Ford Explorer awaiting him. Past the main entrance, the city skyline filled the horizon. An empty guard's booth protected the view. Reinforced concrete walls surrounded the available parking spaces.

The containment team streamed into the garage from the entrance and formed a single file line of six people clad in black body armor, helmets, and gas-masks.

Two of the team, a man and woman, stormed passed the scientist to the rear exit. Two men guarded the main entrance. And the remaining pair ducked behind the Ford Explorer.

"Sir, get in the guard booth."

Doctor Fields reacted immediately. He rushed into the cubicle and waited. Windows in each wall allowed him to observe from relative safety.

Shrieks of pain echoed through the building. Beside the rear exit, the first victim slumped to the floor, having been speared by a steal rod.

His partner reacted thoughtlessly, leaning through the door to open fire. The woman was snatched from her feet and out of sight. Her screams cut short with a resonant crack.

Minutes passed as the scientist and containment team waited for the seeker to emerge. Doctor Fields focused on the doorway. He pressed against the guard booth wall until he had fogged the glass with his breath.

A shadow drew his attention from the exit. One of the entrance guards lay in a pool of his own blood. The slit in his throat sputtered with each attempted breath.

The other guard careened off the booth and landed lifeless before his surviving comrades.

"Sir, get out'a there!"

Fragments of glass sprinkled onto his head. Dull snapping shook Doctor Fields as the sword tore through his breast. He collapsed when the blade retreated. Straining, he watched as the two remaining containment men opened fire.

The seeker absorbed bullet after bullet while splinters of bone powdered the ground at his feet. Unfazed, he hurled the sword through one man, splitting his face.

His partner attempted retreat, but barely gained one step. As Doctor Field's vision became hazy and he drew his last breath, he watched the guard being force-fed his own weapon.

## 14. Darkness Before the Dawn

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> <em>Chapter 13 â€" Darkness Before the Dawn<em>

Written by: The Wildcat

> Rated: M<p>

\* \* \*

>"Are you out'a yo mind?"<p><p>

Three of the four teenagers roared with laughter. Miles found his friend's criticisms difficult to tolerate on any ordinary day, but having his two female interests join in the laughter was insufferable.

Miles was a silky black seventeen-year-old with bad hair and no concept of danger. He sat atop an old iron dumpster with his back against a four-story apartment building. His glare of anger flashed from face to face in frustration

"Will you shut up! You're gunna get us caught."

"Whoa, easy does it man. Just think about what you said. Do you actually think we can just walk down to the nearest community pool and go for a swim? During a lock down?"

The girls erupted in a pair of mindless giggles.

"Travis, you know they can't do anything to us. It's the government. Worst they could do is take us to the jail and call our parents."

Miles was staring intently at Travis. His friend was a short blindingly white sixteen-year-old. For some reason, Travis liked to wear his shirts open revealing his painfully underdeveloped chest.

"Well," Travis choked, "I'd much rather stay here and find out what goes bump in the night." He drew one of the girls close, believing that his analogy had been subtle and seductive.

Angie was easily taller than Travis. She sported a mottled tan and a forcibly stuffed push-up bra. For an instant the torpedo-like protrusions beneath her ripped, molded green shirt seemed to envelop Travis's head.

"Get down boy," she chuckled while pushing him away. "You gotta think of somethin' better than that."

When his friend began virtually begging, Miles turned his attention to his date for the night. Beth was a pretty brunette with glistening brown eyes and a better tan. She wore a string bikini bra that had been drawn taut in attempt to accent her breasts. Unfortunately, the bra simply flattened her chest.

Still, she was pretty. A shy girl as evidenced by her blushing cheeks and her efforts to look away.

"Anyway," Miles began, "I think we could find one of the indoor pools that weren't guarded tonight."

"Are you crazy?" Angie blurted. "After everything that has happened tonight. Those buildings were downtown. Those monsters could be wandering the streets."

"Don't worry," Travis said, again trying to pull Angie closer. "I won't let the big bad monsters eat you up."

"Please! You can't even button your shirt."

At last, it was Miles's turn to laugh. He was almost snorting with pleasure when the white SUV pulled into the alley. It stopped directly in front of the small group. The unmistakable mesa emblem was emblazoned in black on the door.

"Ah crap," Miles began. "That's gotta be one of those agents."

Travis took the arrival in stride. Thoroughly overconfident, the boy approached the door with a swagger. He tapped on the glass and started to wave a greeting.

Miles jerked back in astonishment as the boney hand shattered through the tinted window. Travis's head slammed onto a shard of glass as quickly. While the body fell, the skeletal face peered out of the vehicle and the door started to open.

Beth darted down the alley, but Angie began shrieking uncontrollably. She backed into the wall and sank to the ground. Miles reached down to her, but the sword struck Angie's chest allowing blood soaked tissue paper to dangle from the wound.

Stunned, the boy rolled off of the dumpster and followed Beth's path of escape. He could see her reach a maintenance door and begin banging on the metal. He raced to her side and began yanking at the locked handle.

He tried to keep track of the monster, but he soon realized that it was gone. The abandoned vehicle and Travis's body were all that remained. Beth was still screaming incoherently, but there was no other sound or movement in the alley.

Slowly, the realization of opportunity found the young man. He pulled the handle one last time and then started to search for a fire escape or open window.

Beth's screams became raspy wheezes. Miles spun to find the bone plated freak holding Beth by the throat. She kicked aimlessly. Her hands clasp the skeletal arm in desperation.

Miles took one hard step toward the monster. It drew the long, spinal shaped blade along Beth's exposed belly. He dropped the girl and left her to wail with pain and die slowly, desperately trying to hold the wound shut.

"You bastard. You fucâ€¦!"

The impact was tremendous. It pinned him to the wall. Miles never realized the irony of that moment. He never saw the immense strength of the seeker as he tore the locked door from its hinges. Nor did he understand the skill it took to pitch the metal obstacle as if it were a shuriken. He only had time to recognize the force that ended his life.

---

Kain was dizzy. His body felt rested, but his instincts told him to sleep. Ignoring the sensation, he passed through a curtain of mist and into the dimly lit laboratory.

Before him, an infinitesimal human waited patiently. She was scrawny and pale. Her scent was particularly sour. To stand in the same room with her was enough to make the twelve-foot beast cringe.

Casting an idle glance to and fro, Kain realized that she was alone. The hallway beyond the woman was quiet and empty. Void of even the feeblest humans. Kain considered his surroundings and drew a guttural breath.

"Where is my father?"

"Kain, I have bad news," the little woman began in a scratchy squeak. "Your father is... dead."

"What?" the beast asked blankly.

"Our facility was attacked by ERCU forces. They leveled a warehouse and blasted a fifteen-foot hole through your father's office. They unleashed some form of assassin on us and slaughtered several people."

Kain stood motionless, judging the woman's words with care. He could sense something different. The absence of life at CRI left a void of pungent odors. He could only smell the rot of the woman before him and some distant stench altogether new.

"We've evacuated to a secure location. You and I are the only ones left."

"How long was I in this thing?"

"Three days."

Suspensions laid heavy on Kain's mind. He had no reason to doubt the woman's claims, but his rest had seemed as only hours. Could his relatively minor wounds have required three days to heal?

The woman disappeared into the outer hall without a sound. Grunting with frustration, Kain forced his chitin bulk through the door frame and followed. The woman's destination was a service elevator, the only lift powerful enough to support Kain's weight.

As the metal doors squealed to a close, the woman turned to face Kain. "As long as the ERCU has free reign of the surface, we aren't safe."

"ERCU? Those are my mother's work?"



"In a manner of speaking. They have long since been bastardized. But if we could secure the controller droid called "Commander" we could utilize the technology. Rebuild your mother's original concepts. And secure our facility."

The elevator shivered as it halted. Its doors howled open casting an echo down the hallway. Kain winced as he smelled the stink of rotting flesh. He could see the forced office door near the end of the hallway. Even though days had passed, he could still identify his father's odor.

Together, the woman and her massive charge approached the bloody remains of four victims. Pools of blood and gore congealed in the center of the passage. Sniffing the gun powder particles that remained in the air, Kain grew more apprehensive.

He cast a discriminating eye into an obliterated office. One body dangled by a stretched neck wound warped around exposed debris, but his father was not present.

"Where is my father?"

"He led the assassin into an ambush in the main garage. Follow me."

"NO!" the giant snarled. With one massive paw he clasped the woman by her waist, squeezing her soft abdomen. The gush of breath that left her could have been a pointless effort to scream. Kain lifted the woman to his face and growled. "You give me answers!"

"Please," the woman whimpered, "Look in the garage."

Kain snarled and hammered through the office wall sending shards of concrete and plaster sprinkling into the large impact pit in the floor. He swatted the contorted man's corpse from the rebar that held him up. The body cracked against the closest wall and tumbled into the hole.

The creature thundered into the outer wall cracking the concrete and instinctively tightening his grip on the woman's torso.

"Please," she gasped.

Ignoring his hostage, Kain pounded the wall and dusted himself with crumbles. A final powerful lunge shattered the barrier and warped the interlining steel support.

As the cloud of concrete dust cleared, Kain bounded toward the scent of his father. He covered the short distance at speed and refused to slow down. Crashing through the rear exit, Kain stopped short.

He dropped the woman and approached a small glass booth across the garage. He eased forward as though he expected the guard's booth to explode. Inside, his father lie contorted in a pool of blood.

"He was stabbed in the back."

"I told you," the woman pled. "The ERCU has a new assassin."

"I can't smell anything in here. It's as if he was stabbed by the air itself."

"Please, if you could... We know that the ERCU are assaulting a military base west of the city. If you catch the controller droid, it would allow us to take control of the ERCU and..."

Kain stepped through the garage entrance. A single blue pick-up truck remained parked on the road. A body armor clad man lay beside the vehicle in blood soaked sand. Suspicions again filled the creature's mind.

"Never mind that, I'll go. But I want to know one last thing. Where is my ally, Shk'Rha?"

The woman shuddered visibly. She hesitated for a moment and then clutched her abdomen. "He's dead. The ERCU cornered him in the warehouse compound. He destroyed all but one droid. But it got the drop on him."

"I see." Kain hopped out of the woman's sight only to double back. With the stealth of his genetically enhanced body, he scrambled atop the garage and waited.

The woman was slow to emerge. She turned to the blue truck and retrieved a small black radio. Clicking the transmit button once, she sat in the driver's seat. There she waited.

"One, go ahead."

"Kain is on his way to Black Mesa," said the woman in a hushed grunt.

"Understood. Where is Trainer One?"

"He's indisposed."

"Doctor what are you doing?"

"I'm leaving. If that Shk'Rha thing was right, then I must protect my baby. That thing died trying to protect it."

"Lucky for you," Kain muttered under his breath. "If he weren't my ally, I'd gladly tear your head off."

"Doctor Betruger, you can't be pregnant. Listen, they won't let you do this. Don't make..."

Ignoring the warning, the woman pitched the radio into the road and slammed the door. Kain watched as the blue truck wheeled onto the road and barreled into the open dessert. He hissed his detest for the alliance he had made.

Then, he turned toward the city and flexed his mighty legs. Thrusting himself high above the sands and crumbling road, he noticed the gleam. He considered the pleasure of destroying the machines that marched toward CRI, but decided that finding the so-called controller droid in the human military facility would offer more gratification. Vengeance would belong to him.

---

To Ellen it was an accomplishment rivaling her thesis. The little flame danced about on her fingertip. It gave a warm, soft sheen to her skin. Though she held the flame, she knew that it was impossibility by its very nature.

The heat alone should have been terribly painful. Her delicate skin should have been blackened and blistered. Instead she felt only a gentle tingle, a pleasant pressure that caressed her hand.

Ellen often caught herself doubting the substance of her deed. When she considered the pure lunacy of the puff of fire, it dimmed.

Once, she considered the possibility that her body was excreting some chemical or gas as fuel. She had gagged at the consideration, a reflex that translated into a spire of uncontrolled heat.

Nonetheless, more than two hours of practice had granted her some semblance of stability. She could do nothing practical with her newfound power. It was little more than a magic trick unless she completely lost control.

The entrance to the study opened with an understated squeak. Jay Hollen stood in the door with his back to the woman. Mister Eldridge waited beyond the door. The old man's face cast a shadow of uncertainty.

"I'll keep an eye op'n," Eldridge said.

"Appreciate it," Jay said. "You might want to get some rest. I think we all have a busy day ahead of us."

"I'll knock off in a lil bit. It helps me to do someth'n useful."

"I understand. Thanks for your help."

Mister Eldridge strolled away with a tip of his cap and Jay entered the study. His face was scared with exhaustion. Ellen could only guess as to when he had last slept.

In her view, the man was a guardian. A sentinel against the horrors she had witnessed. He was a kind man, or so she perceived. His voice was gentle and comforting. When Jay spoke to Ellen, she felt the shyness. He was far more self-conscious than he would admit.

Moreover though, it was Jay who had encouraged Ellen to tempt her unexpected power. Her initial reaction had been terror. She was blithering uncontrollably when Jay began to reason with her. He helped her to see the possibility of strength. His understanding manner and eternal optimism was more than welcome.

Ellen watched the man sink into his office chair and confront his computer monitor. She could see the sleep pulling at his face. He was working maniacally, but the truth of his fatigue was fully visible.

Brushing a lock of hair aside, she relaxed and reclined on the couch.

Feeling her glossy purple nighty drape loosely over her skin, she considered allowing a bit of cleavage to obtrude fancifully.

However, she drew the fabric close. She realized, with bashful reserve, that such an act was desperately forward. The fact that she barely knew the man, effectively her captor, merely confounded the absurdity.

She realized with considerable disdain that she had been contemplating the role of a victim awaiting her rescuer or conqueror. That behavior was decidedly beneath her. Jay was desirable, but Ellen was not a hormone crazed teenager. She was a scientist and a grown woman.

"Did you find him?" she ventured in want of a distraction.

"No," said Jay without breaking attention from his monitor. "Mister Eldridge showed me the hallway, and we searched everywhere. I even checked the security feeds. For some reason, the security systems had been set to cycle in a sort of rolling blackout. All I ever saw was Peters walking toward the nearest dead zone. When the system returned, he was gone."

"He escaped?"

"Probably."

"That doesn't worry you?"

"No. I already fixed the blackout issue. We're perfectly safe." Jay turned toward Ellen with a comforting smile. Then he appeared to notice the blackened scars along the ceiling. "Have you made much progress?"

Warmth rushed to Ellen's face along with bright redness. She diverted her eyes before responding. "I think so. I couldn't get anything at first. Then I couldn't stop. Now, I can control it... sort of."

"It'll take time," the man offered. "We don't learn to walk, or swim, or do much else in one night. You should probably get some sleep and start again later."

"I want to. I'm certainly tired enough. But..."

"Yeah, I know." Jay began tapping keys on his console. He worked feverishly. Ellen wanted to say more, but could think of no worthy topic. Timidly brushing one furry foot against the heel of the other, she soon found herself distracted in thought.

She worried that Doctor Peters would return with an army of CRI security officers. She imagined being stripped and shackled to an examination table while strangers inserted and removed tubes. Perhaps one of her retractable claws, an entire toe, or even a whole foot would be taken as a sample. Curious as to the reason that fur only grew below her calf muscles, they might even sever the entire leg. Naturally, her arms would be amputated and dissected.

Ellen clinched her eyes. She had no desire to dwell on such

morbidity. She tried to consider many different subjects. But her thoughts always returned to the nightmarish evening. She had been experimented upon. She had watched monsters rampage throughout the downtown district. She had seen people die in mass, or so she believed.

Every time she closed her eyes, images of collapsing buildings and sinister creatures battered her mind. Her only escape was to observe the man and his computer. With her attention on him, she could forget. Forget, at least for a few minutes.

At that moment, Jay was watching a video clip. The low resolution video offered no sound. It was grainy and the color flickered uncontrollably. Ellen could see a room filled with equipment. One device in particular occupied the screen.

It was a massive cylinder that dangled from the ceiling. Entire sections of the cylinder were spinning with blurring speed. Bolts of energy leapt from the machinery and struck a conical sensor array on the floor below. A single channeled blast streamed directly into the receptacle.

Alone, one man approached the spray of raw power. He was pushing a piece of equipment. The smaller device boasted a pair of mechanical arms clutching a golden rock or crystal. Even as the device rotated and manipulated the rock, stray arcs of static connected.

The man pressed onward until the rock was fully bathed in energy. The screen flashed green and was replaced with blackness.

Apparently sensing Ellen's observation, Jay stood and approached. He sat beyond her feet on the end of the couch. He focused on Ellen and seemed to examine her face. The pair sat in silence for several fleeting minutes.

She would have enjoyed the depth of his gaze. That look of restrained desire. Unfortunately, gazing into the blue of Jay's eyes was difficult from her reclined pose. She quickly developed a cramp.

Rising to sit beside the man, she felt certain awkwardness. To cover her unease, she asked, "What's happening?"

"I don't know, but it's big."

The woman sighed. She would never sleep.

"Ellen. I know I need some rest, and you do too. I'm being silly in trying to keep working on this tonight."

"How can I sleep? This night has been hell. Every time I start to unwind, something else happens."

"I know. But we do need rest. Why don't we watch a little TV? That always helps me sleep. It'll help slow your mind down and maybe even take it off tonight."

Jay produced a small remote control from the arm of his couch. He pressed a button and waited while a panel in the opposing wall revealed a flat-screen television. The screen buzzed to life almost

instantly.

The first image was that of devastation. A giant pile of rubble filled the city street. Rescuers dug ferociously through the debris, illuminated only by portable emergency lamps. Trucks of various sizes waited to cart debris away.

In the foreground, a lean black woman with makeup befitting a streetwalker spoke directly to the camera. "...that is still only an estimate. The only confirmed reports of reestablished power have come from the west side. On the positive though, power plant workers believe that at least partial electricity will be restored to the entire city within the hour.

"Now, we are being informed that the curfew is still in effect. So, please, remain in your home or business until eight this morning. Only the rescue crews are needed at this time. And as a reminder, all communications outside of the city are to be forwarded to Agent Oldham for approval.

"We do want to inform you that we will begin recording a prepared sequence for the national media shortly. Please ignore..."

A commotion erupted in the background. Men and women scrambled down the ruins. An ambulance backed into position as a cluster of rescuers moved toward the vehicle. The camera zoomed in on the center of the small band and located a small body being carried on a stretcher.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the newscaster cheered, "a survivor has been found. From our position it appears to be a young girl."

Ellen shook her head. Even the television would remind her of the horrors of that night. She was about to ask Jay to turn the television off when she noticed the tiny speck of light on his cheek. That single tear spoke volumes.

The woman leaned close to the man and pressed against his shoulder. She had forgotten her own turmoil. Her only want was to proffer comfort to the man she held.

Naturally, Jay offered no resistance. The duo leaned against each other in somber vigil. A quiet understanding passed through that early morning. Then sleep accepted them both in the tranquility of the moment.

## 15. Fading Hope

\*\*Conundrum

> <strong>\_Chapter 14 - Fading Hope\_

Written by: The Wildcat

> Rated: M<p>

\* \* \*

>He should have known all along. The evidence had been building to one undeniable conclusion. Perhaps he had been ignoring the truth rather than accept the possibility.<p><p>

Radiance smoldered in the heated sands. The late afternoon sun sagged above the western horizon. Fading from blue to orange, the blistering sky began to mimic the century high temperatures of the day. Even the sparse clouds seemed to boil away.

For a few minutes, the vigilante allowed the heat to roll harmlessly over his suit. Internal cooling blocked the kiss of arid winds, but he found certain tranquility in the moment. It was as though the sun had washed away the evil.

Even so, Wildcat knew that a moments serenity was little more than guise. He needed only examine the surveillance recordings that had pointed toward Black Mesa during the night. A battle had raged. The two parties were shrouded by smoke and distance, but the volleys and flares revealed a brutal conflict.

Yet the local media reported nothing. Their only broadcasts remained focused on the downtown rescue efforts. They mentioned casually that two additional buildings had fallen during the night, but they offered no further explanation. Every report was given with feigned indifference.

Sighing heavily, the crime fighter shook the troubles from his head and turned to sit on the ledge of his rooftop perch. The city was awash with activity. Full power had been restored during the early morning hours. It was a welcome return for the residents. They reported for jobs or aided in the recovery effort.

But a whimsical and unsettling air had settled on the city that morning. With guarded actions, the sensation was obviously felt by all.

For Wildcat, the feeling grew with his visit to the city. Expecting to find a bustling county detention center, he had been shocked to find that the jail was a small building with two police guards and as many inmates. His visit proved fruitless within minutes.

Turning to the city hospital, The Wildcat decided to investigate several rumors regarding a handful of patients held in the secured wing. He was forced to sedate one police officer and one nurse in order to speak with Charles Conrad in private. The man, bearing bandages over his eyes, was edgy. Hearing the mechanical growl of Wildcat's voice, he had refused to cooperate. However, given time and a more friendly voice change, he had been convinced.

Unfortunately, Conrad was a conspiracy theorist. A particularly zealous and unstable sort at that. His information was outlandish and filled with rants about spaceships and UFO crash survivors.

Then the scientist intervened. He was a timid little man with wire frame glasses and a light beard that rounded out his receding hair line. The man's approach had been nearly silent. He had edged around the door frame and whispered his greetings. His offer to filter the truth from Conrad's statements was met with skepticism, but it was a welcome intercession.

Wildcat had followed the man into a large, but relatively secluded room. It was in that isolated corner of the hospital that he met the survivors. Given the testimonies of the hapless band, the mental

picture began to form.

During the early-eighties, the Black Mesa Missile Range had been decommissioned. Secretly though, it had been reestablished as the Black Mesa Research Facility. A handful of thermonuclear weapons and systems were maintained for cost efficiency, but the compound was otherwise a civilian government project.

The development had been initiated as an exploration of new energy sources to combat high fuel prices and the threat of another energy crisis. However, one of the research teams mysteriously developed a new and unrelated technology. Nano-bots.

> Applied immediately to basic clean-suits, the nano-bots were only designed for maintenance. Later incarnations of the suit were developed and marketed commercially, boasting electronic shielding and medical systems.<p>

The income of the suits alone allowed for significant expansion of the base. The original research team was promoted quickly and soon other experiments began under their direction.

\_"-What are you thinking?"\_ Ellen's voice, muffled only by radio distortion, was a startling return to the present.

The Wildcat had asked her to monitor his exploits remotely. It had been a means to placate her concerns, but it also allowed him to remain in constant communication with his base of operations.

Addressing the question, he pondered aloud. \_"I don't think Conrad's UFO theory is relevant, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was something similar. Not after last night."\_

\_"-You mean those creatures might have been aliens?"\_

\_"Sort of. I mean, it IS a possibility. But... I also think it could be genetic manipulation. Just look at what they were trying to do to us. And Mister Eldridge. He was scheduled for something called an HSRP manipulation. I recovered a few charts from the mainframe. Enough to know that it would not have been pleasant.\_

\_"Actually, I'm a little more concerned about those other men. If that Rosenberg was telling the truth, then... I mean... the possibility of opening a link across time and space... even the bonds of our universe itself... It's extraordinary!"\_

Most of the Black Mesa survivors had been noticeably careful with their words. Their attempts to self-censor their testimony had been transparent. However, two of their number had acted as liaisons.

The man with a mellow choral voice related a tale of such daring and unparalleled cunning. Survivalist heroics and dire consequences. The entire story was absurd, but Wildcat could not afford to ignore the man's words. Some of the details might reveal genuine facts.

After the scientist had completed his tale, the lone security guard had stepped forward. He recounted his own testimony. His account was even farther stretched across reality. Yet, Wildcat had persisted in claiming all of the data for further consideration.



As the sun lowered, the vigilante faced a world of new possibilities and new riddles. He had to consider every detail.

\_"-You don't think they were lying, do you?"\_

\_"No. Imagine if even a fraction of what they have described really happened and our government's gotten in over their own heads."\_

\_"-My God..."\_ There was a long pause as Ellen allowed the details to sink in and Wildcat again considered his options.  
> In the growing shadow of a neighboring skyscraper, the vigilante allowed the data to sift in his mind.<p>

\_"Sector C,"\_ he grunted.

\_"-What?"\_

\_"I need to go to Black Mesa and do some digging for myself. Based on what they said, I need to start at the epicenter of this mess. I need to find the test labs, assuming the facility really is still somewhat intact. Is my car ready?"\_

\_"-You mean leave us alone with... Mister Eldridge said your machines finished assembling it a few minutes ago."\_

Turning away from the glow of sunset, The Wildcat glimpsed the grey cloud. Righteous hunger filled the crime fighter. He strolled to the edge of the rooftop and focused on the smoke. And he knew.

\_"I'll be by to pick up the car. Then I need to stop by Chamberlain."\_

\_"-Good God why!"\_ Panic finally slipped through the woman's forced calm.

\_"Because, it's under attack."\_

---

Abandoned.

The Chamberlain Research Institute was but a hallow shell. Assault units had traversed the corridors and passages of the main complex through endless hours.

Finally, Commander had tired. His efforts at Black Mesa had as yet revealed little. He proceeded with caution, fully aware of a familiar but concealed power within the base.

He also dispatched a unit of scouts to track the seeker's progress. He could feel the energy already. The seeker was half full. Though he lay dormant during the day, he would resume his rampage soon. A surplus of power waited.

As dusk settled over the desert, Commander had returned his attention to CRI. Still he had found nothing. Dark Shadow had been weak. He had wasted his power and fallen victim to some powerless force. Without the great charge of dark energy, the guard was virtually invisible.

Commander recalled the data that he had collected that day. As the assault units hurled grenades into the buildings, he reexamined his own conclusions.

In an articulate sequence, windows vomited fire. Outer walls shattered and dusted the courtyard with debris. The machines readied a fresh hail of explosives for the warehouse complex. It was a single thought that halted their attack.

At last he had seen it. His mistake had been heinous, a colossal waste. The warehouse had been destroyed prior to his attack and the maintenance droid had appeared as the only presence. He had ignored it.

Commander cursed himself for being so foolish. The assault units readied their rifles and pushed into the debris.

The welder droid attacked first. It lunged at one of the machines, scoring its armor plating with the welding torch. Undaunted, the robot batted the droid into the open. Twelve independent streams of jacketed slugs tore the tiny robot apart.

For a moment, Commander was blinded. Weak and barely dangerous, the ball of dark energy had been crammed into the first machine's face plate. It burst in a cloud of fire and shrapnel.

Dark Shadow had visibly changed. His once void skin had become stringy and red. Muscle seemed to entangle the guard as a mummified corpse. He steadied himself for another attack and moved silently toward his opponents.

Sinister and pompous, the sneer could not be seen. Commander was grotesquely pleased. He knew of the meat-like fungus. It was a staple of his home territories from millennia past. It was weak but pesky.

While the guard plunged into the midst of the assault squad, Commander turned his attention to delegating orders. \_"--Strike force zero-zero-two. CRI contingency."\_

A weak orb bounced harmlessly off one unit. Another machine snared Dark Shadow with a crippling bear hug restraint. The guard struggled, but within seconds he was gripped firmly by a quartet of metal.

\_"...wheee are mhany..."\_ the demi-consciousness of the fungus gasped through Dark Shadow's mouth.

\_"--I know what you are,"\_ Commander bellowed. \_"--You are thieves."\_

\_"...jhooin us... ..yhou bbelong to uhsss..."\_

A new string of data passed through Commander's mind. He stuttered for a moment and then resumed. \_"--Assault Units zero-one-five, zero-one-six. Target, Black Mesa. Objective, Phase Two."\_

---

He was an old man. Certainly, his hair was only beginning to grey, but he still felt old. Old and helpless. The man in the mirror seemed to age by the minute.

Truthfully, he was in his mid-fifties with streaks of grey in his black hair. His auburn skin had become ashy with blood loss and a lifetime in Black Mesa's laboratories. His eyes were swollen and tired.

His lab coat was tattered and essentially useless. His blood soaked slacks were clearly unsanitary, but the bandages on his stump were the only dressing available.

Doctor Vance backed his chair, a scrapped together wheel chair, away from the mirror. He had all but convinced himself of the fruitlessness of a push to the surface. It was only the thought of his family that offered encouragement.

He moved toward the picture slowly, allowing the memories to batter his mind. For them, he would survive. Even in the rickety, overhauled office chair he would join the final drive for escape.

He collected the photo and exited the makeshift bedroom. It had once been an office in the outer perimeter of the Lambda Bunker. The tiny office complex had housed a large band of survivors for nearly two weeks.

When the surface expedition returned, the team was in shambles. It had been Lauren that explained the situation. If the Lambda survivors wished to see the surface even once more in their lives, they would need to fight.

Doctor Vance rolled into the main foyer. Scientists and security guards were busily trying to prepare their weapons and satchels of supplies. It was a scene not dissimilar to that which had greeted him on his arrival in Lambda.

He and a handful of civilians had been the last to reach the bunker before the explosion. From that day forward, the survivors had assumed that all hope was lost. It was only the chance arrival of a marine contingent that had given rise to new promise.

The marines were already in the outer courts, scouting the escape route. The civilians needed make haste.

At that moment, as a plague, the clicking began. Its source was an older machine. It clicked and chirped violently. Needles jolted to and fro drawing black lines manically. Sporadic clicks and pops forced a cringe from every observer.

Doctor Vance moved toward the legacy console and peered at its readout as though it might attack. His eyes widened and a forced wince distorted his face. He turned to the suddenly quieted congregation. "This is impossible."

"We've got to get out of here," one balding scientist shrieked.

"Nobody panic," a guard reassured. "Just follow the marines to the surface. Let's go."

Doctor Vance glared at the paper. Something was missing. Some portion of the readout was wrong. "My God... It's coming from somewhere else!"

"We don't have time for this doc."

The scientist nodded and pushed toward the exit. His colleagues were steadily filing through the door frame in a subdued panic. The guards were standing idly beside the entrance with weapons ready.

"Get back in!"

"Move!"

"Withdraw!"

The commotion flooded back as a tidal wave and washed over those still in the foyer. The marines were the last to enter forcing their injured into the arms of the science team.

One young grunt pitched a grenade through the outer passage and then doubled over. His comrades pulled the bloodied corpse inside as his last sacrifice sent a resounding burst through the walls.

"GAD DAMMIT! Who the heller' these guys?" one smoke coated marine yelped.

"We need to let them help us," Eli blurted.

"Hell no!"

"Are you crazy Eli!"

Doctor Vance's voice peeked with anger, "We can't just sit here! They can help us. Corporal Taylor, please."

The first of the robots rounded the corner. In the narrow entrance, it stood as a blockade. Bullets spattered and popped off its gleaming armor. It steadied its rifle amidst the deluge of bullets and began spraying the room of potential victims.

But its massacre was cut short. A solid thunk of impact jerked the machine forward. It staggered and turned on the new threat revealing a fist sized hole in its back. Entering the corridor opposite the robots were men clad in the heavy black Kevlar of Black Operations and the grey gasmasks of the marines.

"What the hell?"

"Now's our chance, while they're distracted."

One of the marines turned and shook his head. "They're blocking both routes out. We're pinned down between them."

"That's the Lambda Reactor complex, how'd they get in there?"

Eli banged his fist on a metal file cabinet. "We NEED to let them help! Corporal?"

The Corporal turned sharply as though he intended to strike, but he restrained himself. "If you think... fine. Everybody make room. But if they as much as flinch..."

"What about the big one?"

"HELL NO!" one grunt blurted. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to stop those bastards?"

"Shut up Millar! Vance, send your friends to free him. It'll make a good diversion. Everybody get ready to move! And Doctor, we won't be waiting for them. Understand?"

Eli nodded and wheeled toward a barricaded door in the eastern wall of the foyer. As he pried the last brace free, the door creaked open. The storage room beyond was dank and lightless. In the darkness, a series of red eyes waited patiently.

"Weeee... are pleased to be of service."

"You understand the plan already?"

"We understand much."

Without another word, the creatures emerged and began hobbling toward the battle in the outer court. With leathery skin of green and brown hues, the hunched figures were as old and weary men.

The scientist watched them trot blindly into the crisscrossing streaks of screaming metal. Neither the machines, nor the black suited soldiers hesitated or altered their trajectories.

Splashes of green and yellow ooze burst from each wound. One by one, the creatures fell. Six beasts took their positions and turned on both the operatives and the machines. Even from the confines of the foyer, Eli could feel the static buildup.

"That's it," the Corporal snorted, "Everybody move."

As the flood of humanity emptied into the passage, Doctor Vance could see the green glow form before the creatures. They strained, as to pull every stray volt into their charge. With the crackle of focused electricity, the green arcs snapped and battered the two enemy forces.

Eli rolled into the passage, among the last to leave. He was disappointed to find the machines withstanding the alien's attacks. The tunnel to the surface was completely impassable, and the little aliens were dwindling in numbers.

Then he noticed a hidden beast as it tottered out from behind a pillar. It sauntered up to a massive blast door and touched a fractured security pad with one crooked finger.

The spray of sparks and fragments of its finger heralded the grinding squeal of the red door as it withdrew. The sound, so fierce as to overshadow even the bursts of armed grenades, forced silence on all parties.

In the blackness that filled the new chamber, the single green aura

floated thirteen feet above the concrete floor. Each of its breaths was deep and powerful. For a single second, Eli thought he could here the creature's pounding heartbeat.

It produced a single trumpeting bellow and then the corridor began to shake. The impact tremors were rhythmic and foreboding.

Deep green and painted with scorches, the chitin hull was rounded and segmented. A lone eye, inset deeply within its head, scanned the surroundings casually. Its jagged teeth seemed to gnaw at the air.

Without further hesitation, the machines opened fire. Contact grenades spiraled into the monster and popped harmlessly off. With a growl that made even the roof tremble, the beast turned and lifted its right hoof.

The crack was like thunder. Glass shattered from the light fixtures. Concrete dust billowed around the beast and bits of rock tapped across the floor.

The pulse was a blaze of red energy. Three of the machines were shattered backward instantly. Their remains flashed into a wall of flames that consumed the other robots and pitched them forward. Tumbling helplessly, two additional units ruptured into clouds of fire and debris.

"MOVE!"

"GO!"

Doctor Vance was enthralled by the battle. Even as his colleagues fled into the smoldering passage, he sat in awe. Only when a security guard pulled at his shoulder did the scientist follow.

He never expected to see the surviving aliens skittering behind him, defending his escape. Neither could he anticipate the loyalty of the gargantuan beast as it too fought to defend Lambda's refugees.

It would be days before he fully understood the significance of the fall of the Lambda Bunker.

## 16. Illusionary Constraint

**\*\*Conundrum\*\***

> Chapter 15 - Illusionary Constraint<p>

\_Written by: The Wildcat

> Rated: M<em>

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The flicker was a rainbow of electronic snow. It was a momentary flash of white and a burst of static that filled the monitor. Rolling down the screen idly, the image soon regained focus.

It was the image of fading light during a late afternoon sunset. The

backlit remains of CRI's main complex choked smoke into the sky. In the distance, the profile of the ERCU fighters flashed out of view, hidden by an unusually damp haze.

The tap of a key froze the image. For a moment, Mister Eldridge could see his reflection in the monitor. He looked tired. Tired and old.

Worry lines and wrinkles marred his once handsome features. His graying hair had started to recede and diminish around the top. Even his skin had started to grey.

The old man rubbed his face and tried to clear his head. He considered replaying the video for a fourth time. Surrealistic as the moment was, he found fascination in the sheer power of the attack.

The reality was difficult to reconcile with his emotions. He was watching aircraft bomb American soil. An entire compound was laid waist in seconds.

He knew of the damage of the Black Mesa bomb, but this he could see. He had witnessed the attack live through the eyes of The Wildcat's dash-cam. Awe filled the old man as he began to grasp understanding.

He was sitting at the epicenter of a war.

\_"-Mister Eldridge?"\_

The smooth, mellow voice of Jay Hollen pulled Eldridge away from his reverie. He mashed a button on the intercom's face and spoke in a slow, almost too deliberate tone. "I am here Mister Hollen."

\_"-I need to speak with you in the main garage before I leave."\_

"I will be there in a few minutes Mister Hollen."

\_"-Thanks."\_

The old man had not intended to elaborate so completely. He merely feared the loss of part of an important communication. He never truly trusted modern technology. It was so utterly brittle and fallible.

Eldridge stood slowly and arched his back in a contorted stretch. Age apparent in his posture, he slowly moved toward the door. A somber frown tugged at his face.

At first, working for the government had seemed a clever notion. The pay was decent due to the nature of the city. Of course, the government benefits were excellent.

He toiled for years. Long enough to face retirement. But then something went wrong. His employers "strongly encouraged" him to resign and take a custodial position at CRI.

The entire incident was incredibly crooked. Nonetheless, the custodial job at CRI offered better pay and the same benefits for a substantially lighter workload. Still, Mister Eldridge only took the

position when he realized that he could not actually afford retirement, even with his government pension.

At first, he was quite pleased with his duties at CRI. Certainly, the tasks were menial. But between the pay and the freedom to self-regulate, he was relatively happy.

Then one day he was informed that he would be "on call" at all times. It was a frustrating announcement. Enough so that he began taking a greater interest in the facilities he maintained.

He inadvertently found a project transcript and was discovered with the document. It was then that he was "offered" a transfer to the satellite laboratories. Of course, he would be living in a provided dorm room in one of the sub-levels.

Any thought of resistance disappeared when the old man found himself surrounded by soldiers trussed up as over-equipped security guards.

Eldridge shook his head in disbelief. The entire ordeal began only a month prior. How great was the change that overtook his life in that time.

Of course, the appearance of Mister Hollen had been a welcome relief. And given the knowledge that he had obtained since the vigilante claimed the satellite laboratories, Eldridge was more than content to remain in the facility.

In some ways, he felt that assisting the crime fighter was a civic duty. The old man viewed himself as a deputy or employee rather than prisoner or quarantined victim.

Mister Thomas Eldridge, assistant to The Wildcat. Perhaps it was a fantasy, but given the chance of meeting Jay Hollen in person, he had developed a great deal of admiration for the vigilante.

Eldridge rubbed his temples and shook his head wearily. Having witnessed the destruction of CRI, he knew that his circumstance had changed once again.

The old man paused beside the commissary entrance. In its simplicity, it was a dining room with a built in kitchenette. Dim, mellow lighting added a touch of warmth to an obviously faux wood paneling. A pair of oak tables with matching seating labored to provide suitable comforts.

And seated at one table, Doctor Colt and Mister Hollen shared an early dinner. Hollen was adorned in his full body armor, with his helmet resting in the seat to his side. Doctor Colt sat opposing the vigilante with carefully tended hair. Though her garments were still plain, she cast an image of youth and beauty.

The couple attended each other with focused gazes. Mister Eldridge watched with a fond remembrance of an earlier age. He remembered the feelings of want and desire. He grinned approvingly.

For the sake of decency, Mister Eldridge turned away. He continued to the elevator at the passage's end and selected his floor. Beneath the rumble of the elevator's motion, the old man sighed. Memories of his



first great love dazzled his mind for but a few seconds.

The elevator doors opened with a chime and allowed the ruckus of the garage flood in. Mister Eldridge stepped into the chamber and waited. The plastic and metal wall panels were gone. Bare concrete encompassed the interior.

Three bays divided the expansive room. The first was empty, save for computerized maintenance utilities. The middle bay was host to a simple white van, one of CRI's default stock.

Screeches and pops hissed out of the final bay. Its lone occupant was the chassis and major components of a new and largely incomplete vehicle. Automated equipment manipulated parts. Bursts of sparks tumbled away from fresh welds.

"I had hoped that the truck would be finished, but you may need to use the van."

Startled, Mister Eldridge turned to face Mister Hollen. "You already finished yer... meal?"

"Unfortunately. I had to hurry. I even left my car outside. I'm afraid we may be out of time."

"You think'n 'bout Black Mesa?"

"I think this entire mess... everything... centers around that base."

"I called you down here because I have one last job for you, and I don't want Ellen to hear all about it. She's worried enough as it is. I said my good byes but I don't think she was ready to accept them."

Concern painted a clear pattern on the vigilante's face. His voice dropped to a low murmur. "Based on what the survivors said, power may be out and the regular transportation will be offline. It could take weeks to search the base thoroughly. But..."

"Yer not expect'n to come back."

Hollen nodded. "I have a feeling. I sense something on the horizon. After I leave, I want you to pack whatever supplies you can into the van. You should be safe in here, but I want you and Ellen ready to leave at a moments notice."

"I can do that."

"Thanks," Hollen said and proffered a hand.

Mister Eldridge accepted the gesture and smiled. A new sensation of dread filled the old man. His future had taken an unpredictable turn. Still, he was faced with the option to make his own choices. For the first time in years, he was grateful for that simple liberty.

He watched as the suited figure mounted his helmet and turned toward the nearest garage exit. Bursts of compressed gas spewed from the joints in the black armor. A soft tone chimed the activation and a synthetic voice announced, \_"The Wildcat... is..."

online."\_

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High above the skyline, the grey and black clouds appeared to churn and pulse. A surprisingly cold northern breeze swept through the streets. The clouds had developed rapidly bringing the possibility of a severe storm.

Unbelievable. Not only had the apartment complex been evacuated before dawn because someone decided to kill four teenagers. Not only had he been turned away in the early evening because the investigation was incomplete and the killer at large. But now he would be forced to check into one of the public buildings by a thunderstorm.

Doctor Otness hated public places. People were always too nosey. The middle-aged scientist blamed humanity at large for his receding hairline and its suddenly graying strands. He missed Black Mesa. At least at work he was left alone... mostly.

A warm arm crossed his back and produced a gentle squeeze. The scientist sighed pitifully and looked down on his diminutive companion. Nora's russet colored face, through strands of black hair, peered up lovingly.

She was the only person that at least tried to understand the doctor's dread. She began to rub his chest soothingly.

"Maybe we can find someplace at least a little private. Wouldn't that be nice Philip?"

Otness grunted a neutral response. He fully understood the woman's intention.

Philip stopped before a storefront and stared at the reflection in a plate glass window. He was an average man. He was young compared to many of his former coworkers. With chiseled features and brown eyes, his face could be handsome save for a double chin.

Beside the man wearing a plain sweater and plain slacks was a lackey. A five foot nothing lackey. Clad in a silky, all too revealing blouse and a short denim skirt she WAS enchanting.

Nora, despite her size, was built to perfect proportions. Additionally, she was a twenty-eight year old dynamo. She spent hours at work, then showered affection and attention on Philip when she could at home.

Though she worked as a shopkeeper in the city, she was always infatuated with Philip's work. She studied regularly and admired Otness for his every scientific achievement. Of course, she had been hopeful that sleeping with a department head would land a cushy job at the base. It was all any woman wanted from a relationship with Doctor Otness.

"Come on," Nora pled. "Let's just check-in somewhere. I'm getting cold."

"I can see that," the scientist quipped.

"Please."

Doctor Otness groaned in agony and shrugged his surrender. Nora's face immediately brightened and a broad grin formed.

"You won't regret it Philip," the woman whispered while tickling the doctor's chin.

Philip's hand slowly inched around the woman and encroached upon one of her breasts. Even as Nora nudged the doctor and giggled, a cold chill raced down the man's spine.

He hesitated and glanced down through the storefront. It was an electronics store, with an assortment of televisions displayed proudly. Each unit was tuned to a local station which at that moment seemed to be delivering a weather bulletin. The radar image for the city revealed the extent of the storm clouds above.

"What now," Nora whined.

Glaring at the image Otness took note of the red and yellow colors. He waved his hand over the window in an exaggerated motion. "According to this, we should be standing in the center of a downpour."

"All the more reason to go inside."

Otness nodded and the couple began a slow stroll down the street. The man allowed his fingers to wander covertly. In response, Nora slid a hand under his sweater and began lightly caressing the small of his back.

As the couple approached the nearest intersection, they barely noticed the commotion at the entrance of the city hospital. They stopped only when their path was obscured by a man in a Black Mesa security uniform.

A slow but steady trickle of hospital patients exited the building and disappeared around the next corner. Occasionally, a doctor or nurse would wander outside with a wheelchair bound patient.

When Philip noticed two men wearing military uniforms across the street, he became incensed. "What is the meaning of this?"

The security guard turned and gestured at the sparse line of patients. "We're evacuating the hospital."

"Why?" Nora asked with legitimate concern. "What happened?"

At that moment a police siren interrupted the guard. The squad car screeched to a halt and its occupants exited. The driver turned his attention to the men in military uniforms. The other officer approached the guard.

"What the hell is this?"

"We're evacuating the hospital."

"Might I ask why?"

"It isn't safe. Our marine friends over there managed to make contact with..." The guard hesitated. He suddenly seemed concerned. "Look, we're leaving. If you're smart..."

"With who? No. Forget that. You aren't taking these people anywhere. Who do you think you are?"

The punch was stunning. Philip stood shocked. Nora began to squeeze him tightly. She was trembling uncontrollably.

The police officer toppled backward, falling at the guard's feet. "I'm Black Mesa security."

"Good God! What have you done!" Otness screeched.

Across the street, the Marines snared the other officer and carried him toward the hospital. Panic stricken, the couple began to back away.

"If you know what's good for ya," the guard said softly, "you'll get out of the city. Our little band here is going to join up with the survivors and lend a hand."

"What survivors? What are you talking about? Forget it! I don't want to know!"

Otness pulled Nora with him and started to walk briskly away from the commotion. He just wanted to get away from the crime scene. He turned down the first alley he found and began wandering aimlessly.

After a few minutes, Nora began to whimper softly. "We have to do something."

The flash of light was almost blinding. At first, neither man nor woman could identify the source. With a bass rumble that shook the windows of on-looking buildings, the thunder was tremendous.

Glaring upward, Philip could see the spidery branches of more distant lightning within the clouds. A web of white hot energy filled the cloud with a green tint.

Suddenly a new bolt lashed out, blasting some unseen and distant ground antenna. The peel of thunder was more subdued by distance, but Philip was more concerned with the intensity of the storm.

Then he saw it. Standing ten feet beyond the couple the beast was a leathery, broad monstrosity. It stood more than seven feet in height. With four arms sweeping the air as if feeling the storm, the beast's lone eye came to rest on the man and woman.

It reached toward them displaying a blue claw at the tip of one arm. No. It was not a claw. It was holding onto the arm like a beetle clinging to a tree limb. It had three large mandibles that gnashed and gnawed in anticipation.

Philip almost missed the thin sparks that danced on the tips of each jaw. The blast of energy struck his shoulder and singed his sweater. He stumbled backwards forcing Nora to tumble onto her side.

The scientist hesitated for a moment as if to consider the woman that reached for his hand. Tears streaming down her face, Nora pled for his protection. Philip whipped away and scrambled toward the nearest bend in the alley.

It was a cowardly act. He knew as much. But he was not thinking of bravery, or love, or even lust. His only concern was his escape.

On hearing Nora's muffled screams he cast a vacant, fleeting look back. The gristly beast held the woman up, dangling by one leg. She writhed helplessly until the blue insect pinched her belly. Otness refused to watch as her half-naked corpse snapped ridged with each successive shock.

He ran. He raced down the alley distractedly until his foot smashed into a partially exposed drainpipe. Slapping onto the concrete, the man rolled onto his side. Rubbing a fresh cut under his chin, he saw them. A pair of dumpy little beasts galloped toward him on stumpy legs.

Single sickle claws capped each arm and slashed the air. The beasts were faceless, their eyes pressed firmly to the sides of their body. An array of boney spikes jutted from their chest.

The creatures stopped sharply at an adjoining alley. They were focused on something else. Hopping and tapping the ground with their claws, they seemed to be mounting a threat display.

As quickly as they had appeared, they darted out of view. Philip dragged himself to his feet and took one step backward. Then the remains of the little creatures, neatly sliced halves, spiraled back into the alley.

The white figure sauntered into view. The skeletal face, a permanent scowl, turned toward Doctor Otness and offered only a split second of awareness. Then darkness.

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Another violent jolt. Utilizing a black operations Osprey was a sour duty for the taskforce. It was a fall from grace to use such simple and often dangerous transportation, but it would arouse less suspicion during the initial raid.

The interior of the vehicle was poorly illuminated. Each member of the squad meditated in silence as they awaited their deployment orders.

Their uniforms were black and grey. Designed for urban combat, they were bland and angular. No skin was visible.

Each man or woman boasted the same powered combat vest and night vision equipped helmet. Each voice, should they ever choose to speak, was masked by the same voice distortion device. None of the troops were distinguishable from the others save for markings on their chest.

Sitting at the command position, Sienkeitto was fully aware of his environment. Outside the Osprey, a storm. A torrent of updrafts, crosswinds, and general turbulence.

The main black operations force had diverted around the clouds. But the ETM squads were more than capable of navigating a simple thunderstorm. It made better cover for their attack.

The other two transports under his command flew in formation. They would begin drop procedures soon. Then... Only time could tell what would happen then.

Sienkeitto turned his attention to a forward monitor. Pressing a unique sequence into the provided console, he accessed the mission objectives and displayed them for his team.

In silence, they read their instructions. As commanding officer, Sienkeitto had been fully briefed by General Thurber, but it was standard procedure for an ETM operation to reserve the taskforce's briefing.

With one final buckling thump, the three Ospreys passed out of the storm and into the hazy dusk sky over the desert. To the west, the first volleys began. The black operation advance team was pounding ground zero in hopes of diminishing early losses.

Their attack would also provide cover for the primary force moving quietly toward the battle. The ETM taskforce would as usual, bypass the melee and enter a secondary access. Once inside, they would carry out their mission. No one, not even black operations, would know they were present.

Sienkeitto nudged the paneling beneath his seat with his heel. After the drop, the pilots would journey into the desert and camouflage their craft until the ETM's issued a retrieval order. The entire process would need to be perfect, within seconds of an ideal time trial.

With a subtle gesture, Sienkeitto gave the order. His team reacted instantly, checking their weapons one last time. The cabin lights faded and then blinked off.

In the blackness, as one, the glowing lenses of light enhancing goggles filled the transport. Door panels on either side of the vehicle opened at the hands of the assigned soldiers. And the aft hatch descended.

The three transports spread their approach. Their speed had greatly diminished and for a brief but harrowing moment, they began to shudder. The pilots skimmed the desert sands at extremely low speed toward the drop.

As the maneuver brought the rubble and scorched earth within feet of the vehicle, four men secured a crash sled and tripped the release pin. Seconds later, the crash sleds, one from each transport, slammed into the sand. Clouds of dust rolled and broke as a wave.

Sienkeitto took a deep breath and exhaled. Without looking down, he stepped out of the transport and began to run. The vehicle buzzed over his head, easily out pacing him.

He knew his teams were hurriedly duplicating his actions, but he needed not witness the act. Rather, he needed to secure cover. The

ETM's each struck the ground and began their assigned duties.

A javelin of light, the missile tore one Osprey asunder. The hulks of debris crushed those that attempted to escape from within. Tumbling end over end, the hull became shrapnel and the fuel tanks erupted. Unwavering, the two remaining transports held course.

Ignoring the attack, the recovery teams scurried to their assigned sleds and removed the catch pins. Pitching the padded top panels aside, they exposed the three-foot crates within. As pallbearers, they hefted the precious cargo and lugged it to the cover of a burned out security checkpoint.

Above the sand dunes, the crater's edge seemed distant. The rumbles and tremors of the conflict were delayed compared to the visible fireballs that filled the sky. Delta shaped fighters dashed as silhouettes before the blaze of explosions.

Freshly empty, the remaining twin Ospreys broke their formation and disappeared into the dark haze of the night. While the ETM squad regrouped at the checkpoint, Sienkeitto shook his head. Without counting, he knew that five of his men were dead. He had never lost so many in one attack.

Enemy forces would soon converge on the crash site. No doubt enemy fighters were surveying the location already. Gesturing carefully, he took position beneath a collapsed wall and set his modified P90 aside. Drawing the custom sniper rifle from his harness, he focused and steadied his breathing.

Two other snipers took similar positions while the taskforce moved toward the crater. With barely two shanty buildings for cover, breaching the distance would require three frantic sprints across the wasteland.

With the first ETM's securing one crumbling shack, Sienkeitto and his snipers abandoned their checkpoint and trudged forward.

Within seconds of rejoining the team, the snipers had selected new positions. Again the taskforce pressed onward. The full unit circled the three crates in a wide formation and kept pace.

High above, a fully loaded Chinook roared away from the crater. Its pursuer screamed overhead, hidden by the smoke and humidity. A small glow appeared and quickly caught the chopper. Its bulk heaved into a tumbling plummet to the desert floor.

When the team neared the second shack, the snipers again gave chase. Nearing the fragmented building, Sienkeitto began visually searching for the entrance among the jagged debris that lined the crater's outer perimeter.

Reunited with his taskforce, he gestured to a dilapidated ruin. Then he found a cover position and watched the squads move across the final patch of dessert. As they crossed a mental half-distance estimate, Sienkeitto leapt from his cover and beckoned his snipers follow.

A blazing mass, the remains of an enemy fighter, wheeled into a thunderous impact near the crater's edge. Soon, Sienkeitto could hear

every rumble, every crack of weapon fire. He knew that within minutes, his position could be discovered.

The snipers followed their squad mates into the former building and took defensive positions. Sienkeitto scrutinized the partial structure and then signaled. Two of his soldiers rushed to the pile of debris and placed demo charges.

Near simultaneous, the thumps shook the building's foundation. Nonetheless, the sound was lost amidst the torrent of explosions within the crater itself.

Every blast outside showered the squads with debris from the ceiling. Burns and blackened scars overshadowed the passage walls. Powerless, the entire length of tunnel was dark.

Pressing through small piles of rubble, the main parking garage became visible. The old wrecks and fractured pillars would provide ample cover with regard to stealth, but the room was an otherwise gaping expanse.

A black operations squad scrambled into the room and sought cover. As quickly, the machines gave chase. Two complete assault units scattered into the expanse. An exchange of contact grenades filled the room with smoke and debris.

The machines pressed forward. Before long, the armor piercing rounds cut through the debris field and tore one man in half.

Sienkeitto bowed his head in defeat. The battle obscured his teams' path. The ETM's would be forced to enter a running battle and hope to escape with just one of their crates.

He turned to his squad and gestured. The pallbearers placed their crate beside the wall. It would be their backup plan, should any future problems arise. As he relayed signals to the other two crate teams he heard it.

It was a resounding bellow. A trumpeting roar that shook the walls. The black operations team panicked and fled into the open. Yet the machines refused to claim the easy victims. Instead, they began pouring their collective fire into the suspect passage.

Bolts of energy, green lightning by its very appearance, blasted two of the machines. The ground shook and a red pulse of energy screamed out of the tunnel. It struck only one robot, but the machine was annihilated in a wash of flame. Surprisingly, the machines began to withdraw.

A wave of debris rolled out of the tunnel followed by the creature. The green leviathan thundered after the machines, followed closely by a small band of sickly creatures.

Sienkeitto never expected to see humans following the beasts. Scientists, security guards, and even United States Marines poured into the chamber. The black operations squad, stunned as they were, opened fire. However, they were quickly overwhelmed by the refugee forces.

Within minutes, the chamber was clear. Sienkeitto never hesitated.



With a gesture, his ETM taskforce surged into the garage and began the treacherous journey into Black Mesa.

## 17. Illuminating Darkness

### \*\*Chapter 16 - Illuminating Darkness\*\*

The air was remarkably crisp. Not a wintry chill, but frigid nonetheless. Even for a cool desert night, the air felt thick and moist... and cold. Worse. Something unnatural was in the air. Kain could feel the hair on his snout twitch with anticipation.

A mere five hundred meters distant stood the outer perimeter of the Black Mesa Research Facility. Interlocked strands of metal with concrete at the base and barbs of coiled wire and steel across the top. Amusingly simple, but not the real security. The fence was obviously a visual deterrent. Spaced apart at fifty-meter intervals, the true fence was a grid of electronic sensors and cameras along the length of the perimeter.

Even that barrier was lifeless now, powerless and full of shorted circuits. Beyond lay the expansive desert base washed with blackness. Flashes and glimmering flames dotted the distant horizon. The site with such growing forces only complicated an already tedious objective.

The main blast crater, a mock-hillside to the casual eye, had become a focal point for the humans and the ERCU droids. Around the rim, three towering machines struggled and waded, bashing debris aside with each step. They were bipedal, but hardly humanoid.

The body itself pivoted on an elaborate and well armored structure, gimbals and servomotors. The two legs emerged as shoulders rather than hips. Twin batteries of missiles straddled the top of the body like over-sized shoulder-pads. Dual 50-caliber machine guns jutted out beneath the rounded pod on either side of a single massive mini-gun.

Successful missile strikes rolled off the outer armor, casting minimal debris into the air. In response the machines unleashed a flurry of high-caliber fire. The mini-guns spat bursts of flame. Rockets screamed into the air seeking more distant victims and an occasional airborne foe.

Human aircraft cut back and forth above the surface, drilling the towering machines, but finding no effective mark. During the battle, attack helicopters had followed initial bomb runs. Now, with an unseen black terror slicing through the night sky at rippling speeds, the humans had withdrawn one weapon in favor of another. Jets fighters.

The design was familiar, but the beast did not know their designation. The change offered limited success, but the sudden burst of ground fire that rained out of the crater indicated opposing foot-squads.

The wolf bowed his head and allowed it to rest on his massive paws. Obviously, the battle was starting to spiral out of control, but it would likely continue well into the following day. Kain snarled and

glanced back at the city, now only a glow on the horizon.

He was tired. Too tired to have slept for three days. His body ached for sleep now.

After arriving in time for the opening exchange of rockets, he had decided to delay and wait out the firefight. He would hunt the command droid, but an onslaught of heavily armed warriors would slow him down and possibly injure him. The giant walking tanks would be more trouble. Moreover, such battle could even announce his intentions to his intended prey.

The beast had sniffed around several rock formations and decided on a large pair of boulders. Digging a narrow ditch between them, Kain had dropped down and curled into a tight ball. Then he had shoveled the loose sand over himself. A nest fit for any desert predator.

During his long wait, he had struggled to stave off the weariness. He had watched a second human unit approach... one that appeared much more prepared. The black aircraft had descended outside of the main fighting and the black-clad troops inside had been far more talented.

Only one of the three craft had been destroyed and the soldiers had advanced in near silence. When they entered a secondary doorway outside of the main crater, Kain realized that he could seek an alternate entrance. Conceivably from the other side of the old military base.

Truthfully, now he only waited out of exhaustion. Waited and watched. And thought.

Doubts had been growing for hours, but taking the time to really think about his few true memories had fueled his curiosity. He had already decided that the "command droid" would likely not be inside the base. It was too much of a war zone. No self-respecting commanding officer would step foot into the actual battle. The risk of losing leadership would be too great.

So why had the sour humans wanted him to attack the base?

Perhaps his target lay inside, but as a machine of war, this was unlikely. Maybe they had hoped the battle would consume Kain. Maybe they wanted him present for some new experiment.

Groaning, the great wolf rolled slightly onto his right side. Why had matters become so complicated?

He no longer desired to hunt his original prey. Even at that moment, he could smell the human approach... masked by chemicals and metals and battle. But the scent was present. He would be near soon.

Yet the will to hunt was lost.

Kain had started to think of his origins. Had the human really murdered his mother? That was a good reason to kill him. But... for some reason, he no longer believed his father's words. Some unsettling instinct had trapped his desire for fresh meat and carnage.

Thunder rolled over the desert floor and Kain looked again at the city. The clouds above it were darker now. And a green flash was followed by a tremendous thunderclap. Something had started moving. A green and blue glow had formed near the heart of the cloud wall. And the storm had started to rotate.

Truly, the storm had a new danger hidden within. And...

Kain sniffed and licked his snout with pleasure. Purest of oils. Blended herbs. Slabs of freshly aged meat. Smoke from the broiling furnace. How wonderful!

Her tail swished into view from behind the moss covered stone wall. Another swipe. She had yet to learn to control her tiny rear end. Kain stifled a pleased chuckle and began inching toward the corner of his bedroom. Peering carefully around the corner, he found the pup huddled in a tight ball, giggling wildly.

His great head bowed and nudged her rump. With a shriek, the little one hopped into the air and sprinted three steps into the kitchen, tripping over her mother's tail.

A subtle growl followed. "Must you sneak up on her so."

"Why not?" Kain answered. "It's how she'll learn to prowl without being seen."

The female turned slowly, her long main draped over her shoulders. Her slender white snout and black cheeks raised in a canine grin. "Really? And suppose she doesn't want to be a prowling, snarling, huntsman."

The little one giggled and ducked behind her mother's legs. Peering out beneath her mothers slender tail she cocked her head to one side. "I wanna spy."

At this, Kain allowed his stifled chuckle to erupt in hearty, growling laughter. He wanted to speak, but his mate laughed as well and interrupted his thoughts. "Okay, don't." She wagged a pointed claw at Kain. "She's not really made up her mind yet anyway. Save your gloating for when she's grown up." Looking down at her pup, the mother grinned again. "Not while I'm preparing our evening meal."

The pup giggled and scampered outside. Then Kain found an opportunity. He crept closer. She was distracted by her cooking. Or so she seemed.

He was close now.

The slender white tail flashed into his face and swatted his snout from what must have been at least three meters. "Not now. Not if you plan to eat a fresh meal tonight."

Quickly refocusing. Kain made a clumsy attempt to hide his defeat. "She was going to pounce you, ya know."

"Aye, but she doesn't pounce the way you do," his mate answered with a knowing chuckle. "Go on."

Kain snapped awake to the sound of a horrendous explosion. A flash of green and a streak of red. The battle was intensifying again. As was the storm. Cursing silently, Kain forced himself to sit up. How could he have allowed himself to doze off so easily?

On the crater's edge, a string of tiny silhouettes had materialized along with one large beast. The battle had continued in their wake. These new shapes bore the unmistakable appearance of refugees. Battered, dirty, and injured.

The human woman had said nothing of refugees inside the ruins. This hunt had certainly taken an odd turn. The machines were still firing on unseen targets, which meant the refugees were of little value. That being the case, Kain removed them from his concerns.

Suddenly, his head seemed to twirl. He rocked from side to side and groaned. Concerned for his own safety, he scanned his body for new wounds. Yet he seemed uninjured.

'...she doesn't pounce the way you do,' the voice echoed in the darkness.

Kain leaped to his feet, but stumbled.

He could find no scent. No shadow. No crouching form. No one.

His dream replayed fresh on his mind, and the thoughts terrorized him. He growled and barked a curse. He needed to focus on his hunt. He must not be distracted by dreams.

Slowly, the dizziness faded and he stretched with a displeased growl. Lumbering in half-careless form, Kain bounded across the sands and sprang up to the top of a pillar-like rock formation. Moving south and west, he soon found the stone cliffs of a canyon around him. Further ahead, he could see a human structure. Massive pipes and walkways hanging from outcroppings and ledges.

Steady waterfalls, three in all, cut at the rock face and seemed to have dislodged some of the human construction. Concrete was exposed beneath the flow near the top. One of the waterfalls gushed from the mouth of an old pipe. Another from a crack in the concrete. The third was a spring of water from a newly opened cave.

Climbing to the precipice Kane drank. When satisfied, he scrambled over the top and found a cluster of rocky hills. Jogging, he ascended one and sat.

He was faced now with a new view of Black Mesa. Old buildings, half-destroyed gathered in one small corner. A branch tributary, a man-made channel broken from the canyon and turned across the desert plains. The concrete dam stood crumbling in the distance, water easily over-spilling a rupture.

There, on either side of the damn stood possible entrances to the complex, but on closer inspection they proved only to lead to warehouses or other useless structures. The stink of decay and old battle drifted above this scene. But something else was present.

A less pungent smell. An old scent. The stench of human aircraft. Many. Coming and going. Some form of landing zone prior to the

battle. The scent was ancient by Kain's standards, weeks if not months old.

Inexplicably, Kain winced. Not pain... fear. Something... some instinct warned him to turn back.

But he was determined. Ignoring the feeling, discarding his new misgivings about the woman's story, he focused and began flexing his powerful legs. With a tired ache, his body launched into the air above the base. In the distance, he could see an open crevice beyond the canyon. A sink-hole maybe... but humans had been traveling into it.

Crashing to the sand above the sink-hole, Kain sniffed and examined the world below. It was a deep gorge, perhaps six stories. A mono-rail track crossed the opening nearly half-depth. And a square concrete pad with bright yellow markings spanned the floor. The scent ended with that pad.

The blow fell from above. Crushing and stabbing, three more jabs followed before Kain rolled clear. Towering above him a long slender shape swayed and stabbed at the sand. The end of the growth was a hard spike. At first glance, two red eyes stood on either side of the curved tip. A mouth with several small mandibles and possibly a suction cup-like mouth rounded out the face on the underside.

Two more forms emerged from the sand and began slamming the ground randomly. Kain would have rolled clear and prepared for a counter-attack, but one of the tapping creatures found his chest. To his shock, the tip pierced his chitin breast plate with ease.

Then, with concerted effort, the tentacle-like monster bit down on his left leg and dragged him into the air. Struggling and kicking, Kain oriented himself in a painful back-bend. Then he lashed out with both claws and slashed deep cuts in the head.

He found himself tumbling into the sands and out of purest instinct, he rolled aside and toppled over the ledge. Howling with rage he dropped to the landing pad below.

Smashing to the concrete, he looked back up at the three creatures and sniffed. Regardless of his mission and his pain, he wanted...

He sniffed again. Then he growled and sat. The three creatures were not flesh and blood. He could smell the flowering odors. It was some form of plant. One plant.

The eyes were deception. A natural camouflage. Kain watched the three tentacles slap the sand several more times before giving up and sinking back into the sand. It relied on vibrations. The root was somewhere below the surface waiting for prey.

Disappointed and now bloodied, Kain turned to his surroundings. Before him stood a concrete entrance tunnel. Twin blue steel doors rose two meters above his head. It was as if the humans had built the doors especially for him. The fact would have been pleasing, had the doors not been firmly secure.

Looking back at the mono-rail tracks, the single metal rail wound deeper into the complex and offered Kain his entrance. Regrettably,

he would need to rest now. The plant above had wounded him seriously. The attack had been so natural for the plant, Kain wondered if he had stumbled upon something more familiar than he could remember.

No. Not more concerns about his lost memories.

Kain backed into a corner and began digging a fresh nest beneath the tentacles.

The wolf growled a curse. He had been careless in his doubts and had wandered into an ambush predator's claws. Every part of his life and experience should have prevented that type of wanton recklessness.

He committed to avenge his father. Surely that would end his mistrust. It would focus him. It would bring peace to his mind. It must.

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Freedom. How wonderful the night air tasted!

Eli relaxed slightly for the first time in weeks. He was sitting on the old highway, watching the young and fit travel slowly toward the city. He would follow soon, but for the moment it was enough to know that his family would be escorted to safety.

Escape from the base had been a harrowing dash through old passages and scorched garages. To finally see the sky after so much time in the bunker, Doctor Vance had been horrified to find smoke blocking all starlight. The machines, not just the foot soldiers but those towering behemoths as well, had lain siege to Lambda sector. Only a black operations task force had answered with their own incursion. Certainly, the base would be completely leveled this time.

Fortunately, the two warring parties had been busy pulverizing each other. The green gargantua had cleared a strait path out of the crater and all wounded had been carried. A flood of humanity had poured out of the old garage and stormed the crater's edge. The vortigaunts had been quick to offer their electrical powers for defense, but soon found little need. With the chaos of the battle as cover, only three young men had been wounded in the crossfire.

During the first hour of the hike back to the city, the expression on each face was one of purest rapture. The trek was over sixty miles through harsh New Mexican wasteland, but that point was moot. Open and exposed to ambush, nothing could have broken their exaltation.

In the second hour, there had been a somber moment as the survivors mourned their fallen comrades. How many lives had been given in the bowels of Black Mesa. Deep inside, the moment of silence had cut Eli with vigor. He would always hold himself responsible.

'Prepare for unforeseen consequences.' Eli would never forget those words. They gouged his soul and burrowed into his mind.

It was with such memories that he looked upon the thundercloud above

the city. Flashes of energy, an inexplicable green color. Hissing thunder unlike any he had ever known. Rotation in the clouds, and a distinct green and blue glow.

His thoughts jumped back to that last read-out. The printed form, all of its data at a glance indicated a new signal forcing open the same rift. The resonance cascade, relatively small and contained, had opened more than a portal. It was a beacon. A signal.

Azian and Alyx, they were the only reason Eli continued. He would see his family soon and would lead them to safety. And when secure he would continue his research, would discover the riddle behind the Black Mesa resonance cascade. His goal in life would be to end the disaster and close the rift permanently.

"I think he's over the horizon." The squirrely, nasal voice belong to Doctor Kleiner.

The scrawny, balding scientist was facing the old base. His gaze followed a lengthy trail of dust. For someone so timid, Eli noticed the excitement in Isaac's voice.

"I'm glad to hear that Izzy. Maybe he will see something we didn't."

"Perhaps. If he survives long enough... and of course, if he can return to us in one piece."

Somehow, Eli believed that their new friend would succeed. He was obviously more than any ordinary soldier or mercenary.

The first impression was still fresh on Doctor Vance's mind. The strike of lightening over the city skyline in the distance. The cloud of dust that rapidly approached in the darkness, only visible thanks to the radiance of red and amber lights. Streaks of purple luminance trailing in his wake.

The headlamps could have been furious demonic eyes. The black shape was tall, but parts of it were slicked back like ferocious back-swept ears. The blazing dual rows of exhaust continuously erupting in purple flames.

The rumble of the primary engine was a thrilling roar, the sound of a ravaging sports car. But the secondary engine, the powerhouse that had propelled the vehicle toward the survivors in the darkness... it screamed and howled as an undead beast.

After all of the terrors of the past weeks, perhaps Eli and his colleagues were prepared for such a sight. They watched the vehicle cut through the desert on the old highway. Even the marines held their fire and waited to identify the potential friend or foe.

When the black-suited hero stepped out of his car, the marines approached with caution.

Eli laughed quietly.

Glowing red eyes. Harsh edges on each major piece of body armor. Over seven feet tall and mostly muscle. The figure had looked more monstrous than his dragster inspired car. Doubtless, he could have

torn through the entire squad in seconds.

Even so, the hero had approached quietly and requested the names of the leadership. Doctor Vance had insisted that he be carried forward. Corporal Taylor had also advanced, but his movements were more a warning than an offer of peaceful talk. He seemed more than satisfied to view Eli as the leader in all matters save combat.

Over the ensuing minutes of discussion, The Wildcat had introduced himself and questioned many of the survivors. Learning that Doctor Rosenberg and a number of refugees had already reached the city certainly was a welcome revelation for the survivors. Unfortunately, news of the battle in the downtown district and the rampant corruption in CRI both were dire warnings.

For a few moments Eli allowed himself consider the implications. He surrendered to distraction in thoughts of his wife and daughter. Eli could think of nothing further.

Azian... Alyx... What had he done? What might have been different had he refused to participate in experiment?

'Unforeseen consequences...'

He had no excuse. He had known. He had been warned and he had been aware of equipment issues and containment faults. Rosenberg had been insistent that the experiment be delayed. When Doctor Breen refused, Eli had simply bowed to the orders of his administrator.

Eli regained composure and concealed the cold dread that filled his heart. No one must see him in such self-doubt. He was responsible for his fellow civilians now. Somehow, he had become their would-be leader.

In time, the survivors had agreed to help Wildcat. Eli personally scratched the directions on an old set of maps. Perhaps the hero would find a better entrance into Black Mesa near the old top-side dormitories. Maybe he would discover some truth in the wreckage.

Once the hero had returned to his car, the survivors had succumbed to rampant speculation. Watching the unusual car dash into the desert with a fervent bellow, Eli made up his mind. His original plan was to sluggish. Too trusting.

Safety and escape from horrible memories would have been his future.

Now...

Now his plans had changed. He would encourage a mad dash back to the city leaving the slower, weaker personnel including himself in the desert. The marines and any stout civilians would enter the city and help evacuate in any vehicle they could confiscate. At the very least, the families of his fellow refugees must be retrieved.

Anyone that would join the survivors would be welcome. Eli and his fellow injured would travel with the aid of the vortigaunts and the green gargantua which the security guards had nick-named "Friendly Garg". A sort of evacuee camp would be established outside the city



outskirts. Once ready, the entire party would flee into the desert in mass exodus.

If only he could travel into the city and gather his wife and daughter personally. He hated his weakness now. Before it was inconvenience. Now it was purely a curse.

The first sprinkles of rain found Eli returning his attention to the city. "We need to begin."

No other word was needed. Isaac and another scientist, Doctor Ferguson, helped lift Eli onto his remaining leg. Slowly, they began moving toward the city. Dizziness and pain swallowed Eli for an instant. This journey would be unforgettably trying, but the heavy weight in his coat pocket intensified his will.

The photo and frame struck his side with each hobbling step. It was a harsh taskmaster which bade him move forward.

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Several monitors were blank. None of them were needed, so Ellen had switched them off. She was more than satisfied with the few that illuminated the otherwise dark office space. Just so long as she could see and hear him... and speak to him.

It was silly. A school-girl crush at best. More likely a psychological trauma from being held captive and facing the potential horrors her former employers had planned. There was simply no other reason to feel so infatuated with the vigilante.

Stroking her hair, she scanned the active monitors. Somehow, she had fallen into the same job. More monitors. More radio communications. Still, this was different. She wanted to help the man she had recently come to know .

To her left, one monitor flickered between holding cells. Another monitor flashed over empty corridors. Mister Eldredge appeared on it once, apparently on his way to the garage to double check the vehicle construction again.

For a single instant, Ellen fumed. He really expected her to just leave... What was he thinking? How could she...

Ellen again reminded herself that none of her feelings could possibly be real. She was a scientist first. But perhaps that was the explanation she sought. She had abandoned relationships during her educational career and now she had faced death... alone. No one should have to experience that feeling.

Rubbing her eyes, she realized that she had been staring at the monitors. Hours had passed. Even so, she wanted to watch... wanted to hold on to contact with him.

At least part of her feelings originated in his selfless acts thus far. Jay Hollen... a man wealthy enough to live in some ivory tower beyond this danger and evil. Yet he was the one racing toward the old military base. Toward certain danger.

Strange that he would affect her so strongly. She had seen policemen

and firefighters. They risked their lives for complete strangers on a daily basis. But this man was different. He held some silent strength. A power of will that she could not explain.

He was more than any ordinary man. And his involvement in her life had changed her on a deeper level. His tenderness was muted and quiet... an introvert without his suit of armor, yet also a leader and teacher.

She wished he had not sped off into the desert, or that he would have taken her with him. School girl crush or not, she was certain that nothing could be safer than standing by his side. She longed to know him better.

Dropping her hair, Ellen turned her attention to the monitors on her right. One flickered with a green glow. Night-vision. A camera mounted on the front of that monstrous race-car. The desert was flashing past at incredible speed.

In the distance, the flashes of war danced along the horizon. Periodically, white puffs burst in the sky. Tracer rounds streaked into the air and scattered to the four winds. The sight of such battle terrified the woman. She had known of the CRI scientists evil, but not of the other threats.

When Jay explained his knowledge of the situation, and when she had witnessed his interrogation of the Black Mesa survivors, she had been faced with an altogether darker image of her future.

Somewhere, deep with-in her heart, she felt the truth. The world had changed. She would never live her carefree University life. She would not win any great prizes for astonishing discoveries. Even worse, she was more than woman now. She was a mutant, living in a world that had started to decay.

She brushed one foot with the center toe of the other.

Mutant. She hated that word.

Looking at the next monitor, she was presented with The Wildcat's helmet-mounted camera. For the moment, he was just watching the road. Thankfully.

She would never forgive him if he drove into danger and never returned. She needed more... more of him. Needed to explore this school-girl crush.

Instinct, perhaps heightened by some part of her mutation, told her that she would have to let go. She could never explain the emotion. She never really wanted to.

By now he was nearing the garage entrance. Even on the small monitor, lit only by the night-vision functions of Jay's helmet, she could see the entrance and neighboring dormitories were still intact. A train line passed into the midst of the buildings and then disappeared into a dark tunnel.

In the red glow of Wildcat's personal night-vision, the entire compound was a horrid ghost town... a grave yard condemned. A handful of remains still lay strewn near the entrance. The two tunnels,

different as they were, both appeared as gaping maws.

"The power seems to be out, but the garage blast doors are open." The Wildcat's mechanical growl forced Ellen's heart to race. She wondered if anyone could ever become accustomed to such a voice. Every word was spoken in deep bass tones and blended with a deeper predatory grumble. Even the monitors seemed to tremble with each growling word.

"Could you... use a different voice?"

"For our communications yes," Jay responded. "But if I find any trouble, I need to be as threatening as possible. Sometimes, intimidation can be more effective than brute force."

The vigilante pulled into the garage and rounded a bend. Ellen was amazed by the open passages. She had expected a pile of debris or rubble scattered across the path. Instead, the tunnel seemed clear.

"I don't understand," she began.

"Someone has cleared the area already," Jay answered before she could finish. "The power isn't off, it's being redirected. Someone has been working here since the disaster."

"CRI?"

"Probably. This is more than a covered up accident."

Cruising through the tunnel now, only utilizing the standard engine of his car, The Wildcat slowed as he neared an open chamber. Yet another heavy steel blast door had been opened. Inside, emergency lights were active.

The room was predominantly empty, but a few wood crates sat in the corners and a metal shipping container sat beneath a heavy crane. An old cargo truck remained parked in its loading bay. Its sides were scorched by some intense blaze from weeks past.

Girders stretched across the room's ceiling, but part of the garage had been buried in a collapse. Now the debris had become a dumping site for all refuse and debris. Freshly moved rocks and concrete had been piled neatly. Spent crates and boxes were stacked beside the rubble.

In the distant corner, beyond the debris, a lift shaft yawned menacingly. The platform would need to be called, if it were powered.

Ellen sighed. Maybe he would just wander across a military salvage team. She watched the camera view exit the car and stride up to the lift shaft. There was a quick glance at a guard booth, then a focused stare into the darkness below.

"There's a light on down there."

"What? I don't see anything."

"It's distant. Probably in another part of the tunnel." Jay paused

and then Ellen could swear he growled without the aid of his suit. "I think someone has been working their way to Sector C."

"Is that... bad?"

"Maybe. This is deliberate effort to reach the effective ground zero of this incident. From what Doctor Vance said, someone may be trying to keep this event open."

End  
file.